Traffic, DUI deaths on the rise

Troop I region on pace for 120 fatalities in 1998.

Louis P. Rom
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — Education and extensive media coverage seem to be having little effect on the number of traffic deaths in Acadia-

According to the Louisiana State Police's Troop I, the number of traffic deaths on Acadia highways in 1998 is growing at an alarming rate.

In the first eight months of the year, 33 traffic deaths occurred in the eight-parish area that makes up Troop I from injuries suffered in traffic crashes, according to Troop I statistics.

In all of 1997, 76 people died in traffic accidents. Alcohol was a factor in at least half of those deaths, said Trooper Stacey Barrett, the public information officer for Troop I. In 1997, the number climbed to 103.

Barrett said the number of DUI arrests has remained about the same, while the number of DUI deaths has significantly increased.

By the end of last year, 701 DUI arrests were made by Troop I; in 1998, that number is just 334, a 52.8 percent drop, Barrett said.

Troopers teaming up with trainees has cut into the number of patrol cars monitoring the highways, he said, contributing to the reason behind the declining number of DUI arrests.

"It's only temporary ... but it doesn't help," Barrett said.

Pat Taylor, president of Mothers Against Drunk Driving of Acadia, is looking for a permanent solution to the problem.

"I think the BAC to 0.08 was too high. Drunk driving is a problem when I was in high school," said Sen. Max Jordan, who promised in 1997 to pass an alcohol-sale restriction bill before it came to the floor.

Jordan is chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Criminal Justice, which considers any new legislation that would change criminal law, and said at the time he wanted to see a 0.04 legal blood alcohol content. An effort to reduce the BAC to 0.08 was taken up at this year's legislative session, but eventually killed by Sen. Max Jordan, who promised in 1997 to pass an alcohol-sale restriction bill before it came to the floor.

"It's not easy to do," Jordan said. "It's not easy to do, but it's important. It's important to do."
Traffic

the committee. He did not return a phone call from The Daily Advertiser Monday.

Jordan’s endorsement aside, Taylor said she maintains hope that Louisiana representatives will stop under-age drinking. She says the current procedure of stamping under-age patrons at bars is not working.

“They get alcohol,” she said, “because they leave the bars drunk.” And few are concerned about it, Taylor said.

“We accept it in the Acadiana area, it’s like a rite of passage. People feel like it’s their right to drink,” she said.

Though Acadiana’s statistics might seem high, Barrett could not confirm whether they exceeded the state average. Also, the Troop I statistics do not include fatalities worked by municipal agencies inside the Troop I area.

Statewide, alcohol played a role in 53 percent of Louisiana’s traffic fatalities in 1995. Barrett said she estimated the number of recent Acadiana fatalities that stems from alcohol-related accidents is in the 50 percent range. Part of the effort to curb that trend, Barrett said, is to target specific violations.

“Our goal is to ticket people for the kinds of violations that typically lead to accidents,” Barrett said, citing such problems as following too closely, disregarding stop signs and speeding.

U.S. 90, often called Blood Alley, has yielded at least 15 fatalities this year, according to Troop I reports.

“On U.S. 90 we’ve had a very big problem with people who disregard stop signs, or fail to yield at a stop sign or at a red light,” Barrett said.

Speed is rarely the only cause in an accident, Barrett said. “But it’s going to affect the severity of the accident,” she added.

It comes down to doing the right thing, Barrett said.