

A Prescription for a DUI by Shannon Albritton

Until recently, much of the focus on the subject of “Driving Under the Influence” has been related to alcohol-impaired driving, however, an increase in prescribed medications, prescription drug misuse, marijuana and illicit drug use have broadened the focus of concern to substance-impaired driving or, what is often referred to as, “drugged driving”. In a national survey, drugs were present 7 times as frequently as alcohol among weekend nighttime drivers in the U.S., 16% testing positive for drugs compared to 2% testing at or above the legal limit of alcohol. According to studies available on www.StopDruggedDriving.org, drugged driving now poses a new danger on the nation’s highways in the scale of the better-known problem of drunk driving.

Young drivers are particularly at risk for being impacted by drugged driving. In the last three years, the rate at which youth are driving or riding in a car after marijuana use has increased, according to new data from the Monitoring the Future Survey. A survey of 11th and 12th grade students in the United States conducted by Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) found that nearly one quarter of teens admit to driving under the influence of prescription drugs, alcohol or marijuana. Remarkably nearly half of teens believe marijuana has no impact on driving and more than one third believe marijuana use actually improves driving; only 25% believe marijuana makes you a worse driver. By comparison the majority of teens (62%) report that alcohol worsens driving. Results from a BAPC 2011 social norms campaign survey showed 46% of BUHS students have been a passenger in a car with a driver who had used marijuana in the past thirty days. These results have serious implications for road safety as motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers. Drivers in their first few months of driving are twice as likely to crash as they are after two years of driving. More than half of high school seniors also admit to texting while driving. The combination of driver inexperience, prevalence of texting while driving and, the common misconception among youth that driving after using marijuana makes them a better driver, is a prescription for disaster.

Unlike drunk driving, where impairment is easily detectible through Blood Alcohol Concentration, detecting drugged driving is more complex. Across the state of Vermont, and the nation, there are specially trained law enforcement officers known as Drug Recognition Experts (DRE). These officers have the ability to detect the physical signs of drug impairment and are viewed as the most effective law enforcement safety tool in effort to reduce drugged driving. I recently spoke with Sergeant Garry M. Scott of the Vermont State Police. Sergeant Scott is a Drug Recognition Expert based Williston Vermont. I asked him to share his thoughts on the most common misconception about driving under the influence. “Any drug, included prescribed medications, taken into your system causes a change in the body’s homeostasis which in turn can alter vision, hearing, heart rate, body temperature, balance and coordination; all of which is needed to operate a motor vehicle safely”, said Scott. “Driving a car without knowing how a drug will affect your body and cause impairment can result in criminal action in the event of an accident”. In Vermont, according to Sergeant Scott, DRE requests have steadily increased over the past eight years due to more training and education within law enforcement and changes in

society. Vermont now has twenty-nine DRE's, up from three trained officers in 2005. Every county in Vermont has a DRE and over 900 evaluations have been conducted since 2005. In 2013 alone, one hundred and sixty DRE evaluations have been performed; forty-two percent of DRE evaluations for Central Nervous System Depressants, such as Xanax or Valium, and twenty percent for cannabis. As of November 5, 2013, there have been 53 fatalities on Vermont roadways; 13 have been related to alcohol, 9 were drug-related and 6 people under the age of 18 were killed. According to Sergeant Scott, one of every three fatal crashes has a cannabis component.

There's no doubt that the subject of drugged driving will continue to evolve as prevention professionals, law enforcement and state and local governments work to address how to keep our highways safe and prevent occurrences related to drugged driving. As the debate around the legalization of marijuana as a recreational drug continues, it's important the public understand the potential implications on highway safety. Effective public education will be an essential component in comprehensive safety measures to protect Vermonters. We can prevent drugged driving by applying the same knowledge and safety tips we've learned about drunk driving through education, responsible decision making and looking out for those we love. If you are prescribed a medication, speak with their doctor about how your medication may affect your ability to operate a vehicle and potential legal risks should an accident should occur. For more information on the subject of drugged driving, including helpful resources for the parents of teen drivers, visit www.StopDruggedDriving.org

Shannon Albritton is the Communications Coordinator for Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition (BAPC), a local nonprofit that organizes community efforts to be involved in the ongoing prevention and reduction of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse in the Windham Southeast area. The coalition meets in Brattleboro on the second Friday of each month at 12pm, from September – June. Lunch is provided and all are welcome. To learn more about their prevention efforts or how you can contribute to their efforts visit www.BrattleboroAreaPreventionCoalition.org or call 802.257.2175