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Contact: Steve Walker (619) 531-3890
Tanya Sierra (619) 531-3315
En Español Barbara Medina (619) 531-3305

Fatal DUIs Down from Last Year; DA Using Grant to Target Serious Offenders

Despite Dip, Deaths Still Average More than One a Month

When Alondra Marquez slammed into a Lyft driver at more than 100 miles per hour earlier this year, she had been drinking all night long. On the night of March 23, the highly-intoxicated 22-year-old driver killed one of the Lyft passengers and seriously injured the other. Her blood-alcohol level was more than two times the legal limit. For the last six years, cases in which someone dies at the hands of a DUI driver are now investigated as potential murders, instead of approaching the case as a DUI car crash in which someone died.

This higher level of investigation, prosecution and accountability by the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office is supported by a grant from the Office of Traffic Safety, which is in its sixth year of funding the DA’s DUI Homicide Unit.

Last year, 20 people were killed on San Diego County roads as a result of DUI crashes. So far this year, 15 people have been killed in 12 fatal crashes. While general DUI-related cases continue to decrease overall in the past decade, serious DUI injury and death cases remain consistent. More than 9,629 DUI-related cases were prosecuted by the San Diego DA’s Office last year, down from 9,934 the year before. At the same time, however, the office prosecuted 451 DUI with injury or fatality cases, a 10% increase over last year.

“This grant will allow our DUI Homicide Unit to continue its complex and important work to deliver justice in these heartbreaking cases,” District Attorney Summer Stephan said. “Today’s drivers know the risks and the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, yet images of mangled crash scenes, tragic tales of lost lives and ongoing warnings has not stopped the prevalence of these deadly crashes. That’s why we are focused on preventing DUI fatalities and sending a strong message through outreach as well as successful prosecutions.”
The DA’s Office is receiving a grant of $411,693.00 from the Office of Traffic Safety to prevent and prosecute impaired driving deaths. To date, the organization has provided more than $2.7 million in DUI grants to the DA’s Office.

As part of the grant and with assistance from the State’s Traffic Safety Resource Program, the DUI Homicide Unit coordinates and participates in DUI prevention and awareness in schools, military bases and colleges. It also supports training to local law enforcement agencies.

Funding from this DUI Prosecution Grant will aid the District Attorney’s Office in handling cases through each step of the criminal process. This includes prosecuting both alcohol and drug-impaired driving cases. In fatal and major injury DUI vehicle collisions, members of the team may respond to the crash scene to assist in the investigation.

The DUI Homicide Unit, which launched in 2014, streamlines complex DUI cases by creating expertise within the office. This results in a more efficient resolution to cases and speedier justice to the families who have lost a loved one. The specialized unit creates uniformity in sentencing among the four adult courthouses across the county. In addition, the unit helps law enforcement adapt to changes in technology by having a designated DA Investigator who is trained in the latest techniques in collision reconstruction. Since its inception, the unit has prosecuted more than 120 cases including 92 fatalities.

A dedicated DA Investigator assists law enforcement in finding DUI suspects through investigative techniques. Many times, defendants leave the scene of a crash because they are impaired. By having a dedicated team working with law enforcement, authorities are better able to find offenders and ultimately let the public know that if you leave the scene of a crash, you will be caught and prosecuted.

In recent years, California has seen an increase in drug-impaired driving crashes. The District Attorney’s Office supports efforts from OTS reminding the public that “DUI Doesn’t Just Mean Booze.” If you take prescription drugs, particularly those with a driving or operating machinery warning on the label, you might be impaired enough to be arrested for driving under the influence. Marijuana use can also be impairing, especially in combination with alcohol or other drugs, and can result in a DUI arrest and conviction.

“Prosecution programs ensure drivers who decide to drive impaired and put others on the road at risk are held accountable,” OTS Director Barbara Rooney said. “Accountability is important in highlighting the dangers and consequences of driving under the influence.”

Grant funding from the California Office of Traffic Safety comes from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
About the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office
The San Diego County DA’s Office prosecutes all felony crimes in the county and misdemeanor crimes committed outside the City of San Diego. The office files about 40,000 criminal cases a year and balances prosecution with numerous crime prevention programs. District Attorney Summer Stephan leads the office of more than 1,000 dedicated employees who pursue fair and equal justice, and support victims daily across San Diego County.