

The New London Police Department's

Traffic Education Program

A Review

Chief Kevin E. Wilkinson
January 26, 2007

Introduction

What if someone told you there was a traffic citation alternative that could-

- Prevent future offenses at least twice as effectively as fine/court options
- Help decrease local crash rates by 20%
- Make offenders “significantly” safer drivers
- Encourage officers to boost traffic enforcement
- Provide a more cost-effective way to handle traffic violations
- Be as embraced by the community as a citizens’ academy

Would you be interested?

Overview

In 2004, the New London Police Department made traffic safety a greater priority for the long term. The traffic safety emphasis was manifest in several ways: officers were asked to increase their total number of contacts and decrease their tolerance for certain violations. A municipal court was created, which cut the total deposit on most traffic citations in half. An ad-hod traffic safety committee was formed with representatives from the police department, city council and the city engineer’s office. And, most notably, a traffic safety class was created.

The traffic safety class was designed to add an educational component to the traffic enforcement spectrum. The program was based on the belief that the traditional cash forfeiture does not necessarily make a traffic violator a wiser or safer driver. Most drivers have had little or no traffic law training since they attended a driver’s education program in high school. Worse, most of those school-based programs have been discontinued, leaving the void to be filled by private driving schools. Unfortunately, the depth of discussion and learning that constituted an entire semester of high school may not have been fully assumed in the one-day-a-week classes that meet for a few weeks in private driving schools. Thus, the need for some kind of educational program on traffic law was pressing.

Development

The traffic safety class endeavored to teach drivers the “rules of the road” as defined in chapter 346 of state statutes. Police officers were aware that many traffic laws were poorly understood by the public. U-turn law, railroad crossing, vehicle restraint use, owner liability statutes, and right-of-way rules were among the topics chosen to be addressed.

To fairly control the volume of participants entering the education program, the New London Police Department determined that those eligible for the class would have:

- Just received a traffic citation for a 4-point (or less) violation
- A valid (or recently expired) drivers license
- No traffic convictions for the past 12 months

Those who completed the class would have their citation voided. They would still be responsible to pay for the costs associated with presenting and maintaining the class. Drivers would not be forced into the program, but it would be offered as a new alternative to paying the fine or appearing in court. Referrals from the court were also accepted.

Prior to implementation, the New London Police Department sought review and approval by the district attorney’s offices of both Outagamie and Waupaca Counties. Approval was also sought from the Waupaca Circuit Court judges, who presided over all New London municipal citations until the implementation of the municipal court the following year. Prosecutors and magistrates were very supportive of the program. With this approval, the first traffic education class took place in June 2004.

Program Evaluation - Subjective Data

Each class now consists of a 40-question true/false pre-test, which becomes the outline for discussion for most of the 2 ½-hour class period. A similar test is given at the end of the program, and a class evaluation form is completed.

The program has been in existence for over 2 ½ years, and there is sufficient data to review the success of the classes. By the end of 2006, more than 500 drivers had participated in the program. Each participant is allowed to take the program only one time.

Subjective evaluation data includes the review forms completed by the students. Each participant is asked to rate his or her level of understanding of traffic law both before and after the class. Numerically, the average rating for pre-class understanding is 5.9 (10-point scale), which equates to a narrative response of “some knowledge.” The average post-class rating of understanding is 8.4, or “quite a bit.”

The participants are also asked to provide a numerical response to this question: “Do you think this class has helped make you a safer driver?” The average response is 8.2, which equates to a narrative response between “quite a bit” and “significantly.”

The evaluation form allows students to provide some suggestions for improvements, discuss what they thought was most important, and what they liked least. They are also asked, “Do you think this program is a fair and reasonable alternative to traffic court for drivers with a clear 12-month driving record?” Of 572 participants, only 4 have not answered that question positively. That’s a 99.993% program approval rating!

Program Evaluation - Objective Data

There is a wealth of objective evaluation data as well. First, student test scores are revealing. The average pre-test score is 68.7%. Post-test scores average over 94% - demonstrating an increase in traffic law knowledge, at least for the short term, of over 24%.

What about the driving behavior of those who have completed the class? In the summer of 2006, college intern Ian Seaholm completed an exhaustive statistical analysis of the class, which included a review of driving records for those who had taken the class compared to those who had not. In that study, 52 drivers were identified as receiving 4-point (or less) citations in the summer of 2003, who would have been eligible for the traffic class if it existed at that time. Because the traffic class had not yet been developed, those violators either paid the fine or contested the matter in court. Of the 52 drivers, 17 of them received another citation within the next year. Some of them received more than one citation, so that the group accounted for 34 new violations.

In contrast, of the 50 drivers who received a citation in the summer of 2004, and then participated in the traffic education class, only 7 received another citation in the next year. And the group accounted for only 11 post-class citations – that’s less than a third of what the prior group accrued.

Traffic Crash Totals

The goal of any traffic safety program is to reduce not just violations, but collisions as well. Data suggest that the traffic safety program has also helped reduce crash rates in New London.

Crash rates can vary somewhat widely from year to year, so it is preferable to use multi-year averages to show trends. In 2004 and 2005, the first two years of the traffic safety program and the overall traffic safety emphasis, New London's reportable crash rate dropped 22.7% from the prior 3-year average. That was a larger percentage reduction than any other Wisconsin city in the 5,000-10,000 population range. In fact, that group of municipalities as a whole experienced an increase in reportable traffic crashes. While the 2006 reportable collision statistics per agency are not yet published by the Department of Transportation, our internal data show that our crash rate for 2006 remained at the low levels of the prior year.

Crash reduction is not just an issue of shrinking police calls for service, it represents an investment in preventing injuries and damage – and that equates to saving money. The Department of Transportation estimates that accidents, depending on the presence and severity of injuries, account for an average cost of between \$7,600 and \$60,300. By carefully accounting for each category of New London accidents in 2001-2003, we can show that we prevented an estimated 220 non-injury accidents and 86 injury accidents in 2004 and 2005. That equates to a savings of about **3.7 million dollars**. And we haven't even added in the savings for 2006 yet.

Certainly not all of the crash reductions are a direct result of the traffic education program. Other factors, including signage changes, roadway improvements, and increased enforcement have all helped to bring the crash rate down. But the traffic class cannot be ignored as an important factor in the reduction, especially with the knowledge that traffic class participants commit fewer violations in the year following their education.

Enforcement with an Educational Option

The implementation of the traffic education program was coincident with an overall increased emphasis in traffic safety and the enforcement of violations. It is therefore difficult to say with any certainty that the education program has increased traffic enforcement among officers. However, anecdotal evidence, including the statements of officers themselves, suggest that being able to offer someone a traffic class option makes the entire enforcement encounter less adversarial, and therefore more desirable to initiate. New London Police Department's 3-year average prior to the class was 509 traffic citations per year.

The three-year average with the traffic class shot up to 755. The reduced fine amounts associated with municipal court is no doubt also a considerable factor in making officers feel more comfortable issuing citations for offenses.

Cost-Effective Enforcement

Traffic enforcement should never be viewed as a tool to generate revenue. Its only goal should be the safety of citizens and the smooth and efficient flow of traffic. But it is also wrong to ignore the costs associated with traffic enforcement. Police agencies buy cars, radar units, and gasoline to enforce highway laws. They pay police wages, benefits, training and recertification costs as well. They even have to purchase the uniform traffic citations from the state. It is a big investment – too big, in fact, if the only goal was to generate revenue.

Under a circuit court model, a typical traffic citation for a minor violation – low level speeding, for example- holds a total deposit of about \$160. The base forfeiture is \$30, and all other costs are add-ons to support various programs including the county jail, the crime lab, and the court. Of all those layers of costs, the local municipality is only entitled to the base forfeiture of \$30. And the clerk of courts typically charges \$5 for each municipal citation processed. Thus, the issuing municipality will typically realize only \$25 in revenue for a common \$160 traffic citation processed through circuit court. Worse, most clerks of courts will testify that there is about a 20% default rate on all fines imposed. Under the municipal court model, there are fewer add-on fees, so a greater percentage of the deposit stays within the municipality.

The traffic education class offers a much more efficient use of expenses and revenue. The cost for the New London class is \$50 per participant. If the driver does not pay the cost of the class, they are not permitted to participate. There is therefore no default rate to consider. All participants choose the class at the exclusion of contesting the matter in court. There is consequently no overtime costs for officers being subpoenaed to court on these cases. And the entire \$50 fee stays in the local municipality.

This is not to suggest that the traffic class is a profit-maker. It is designed to only recoup the costs of operating the class. There is significant staff and paperwork costs associated with each class (each participant is given a full copy of chapter 346, among other documents).

Room for Improvement

The traffic education class is not without flaws. The program is presented once per month at the convenience of the instructor. One of the most common student

evaluation remarks is a desire for more flexibility in scheduling the class. Currently, the city has no electronic equipment to enhance the teaching environment. The use of videos and electronic exam scoring would be valuable additions to the program.

If the program were to grow and be adopted by other municipalities, a need would develop for tracking drivers' participation in various classes. This would most logically be accomplished through an entry in the driver record, requiring notification to the Department of Transportation, much like it is done with point reduction school.

Sadly, the program has also met with resistance from law enforcement leaders. Some have argued that once the citation is written it becomes the sole domain of the court. Research of Wisconsin statutes has proven this is not true. The current practice in New London is to hold the citation for five days after issuance before forwarding it to the court. If the violator signs up for the class, the citation goes into a department hold bin until completion of the class, at which time it is voided. The New London Police Department is currently in negotiation with the municipal court to merge the program into the court's purview without losing its benefits.

The program has been presented in various law enforcement circles, but to our knowledge has not been adopted by any other agency in Wisconsin.

Conclusion

The New London Police Department's Traffic Education Program is an experiment in making better, safer drivers through education. It is a program worthy of study to find its application for other agencies or the entire state. Early data show that it does in fact produce safer drivers, which in turn prevents the property loss and personal tragedy of traffic crashes.

NEW LONDON POLICE DEPARTMENT

TRAFFIC EDUCATION CLASS

EVALUATION

Before taking this class, how well did you understand traffic law in Wisconsin?

(circle one number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Very Little Some Quite a bit Much

After taking this class, how well do you understand traffic law in Wisconsin?

(circle one number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Very Little Some Quite a bit Much

Do you think this class has helped to make you a safer driver?

(circle one number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Not at all Some Quite a bit Significantly

What is the most important thing you learned in this program?

What did you like least about this program?

What is the most important thing to add to future sessions of this program?

Do you think this program is a fair and reasonable alternative to traffic court for drivers with a clear 12-month driving record? Y / N