

Do DUI panels work?

In order for the Victim Impact Panel program to succeed, attitudes will change when first-hand knowledge is received. When attitudes do not change, behavior does not change. Research on the psychology of learning indicates that attitudes change when a person's thoughts and emotions are engaged. A person who has become sad is more easily persuaded by a compelling argument than is a person in a happy mood. Hence, a victim sharing his or her life experience is more likely to stir the listener's emotions than an educator imparting knowledge.

http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/PEOPLE/INJURY/alcohol/VIP/VIP_problem.html

The effect of victim impact panels on DUI/DWI rearrest rates: a twelve-month follow-up:

After considering alternative explanations for the results, we conclude that the VIPs can be a cost-effective way of reducing the probability of re-arrest in DUI offenders.

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=10463808&dopt=Abstract

DUI victims of all types have immensely powerful stories to tell. Do Victim Panels work? Do they reduce DUI rates and recidivism? One study conducted in Clackamas County, Oregon, concluded that the creation of a victims impact panel program there reduced recidivism among first time offenders by almost forty percent! Drunk drivers are naturally afraid that they might injure or kill someone, but tend to minimize the severity of impaired driving. DUI Victims Panels powerfully convey the terrible risks of impaired driving. Education of this sort for DUI offenders is certain to lower DUI rates.

<http://www.co.grays-harbor.wa.us/info/judicial/dui.html>

**** SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER article http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/148298_dui14.html ****

BELLEVUE -- Six times a month, George Fraser drives to churches and city halls in the area to talk about the night a drunken driver killed his son and forever changed his life. His voice cracked one night this week when he recalled going to the morgue to identify Geoff's body, praying that it was a mistake.

"You don't want it to happen to you," he told the 95 men and women in the pews of the First Congregational Church, nearly all of whom were ordered by the court to attend this DUI victim impact panel. The hope is that those who drive under the influence of alcohol will change their ways after hearing from victims or families who lost loved ones in drunken-driving crashes. Started in Bellevue in the mid-1980s, such panels have spread across the country. The concept has been adapted to other offenses, such as domestic violence. Fraser and others say the panels give them a sense of purpose, and they believe they are helping to save lives or change people's behaviors by making a lasting impression.

Research on victim impact panels has been mixed. One 1999 study in the Journal of Studies on Alcohol that reviewed arrest rates found that those who attended panels were less likely to re-offend. But two recent randomized trials conducted by researchers at the University of New Mexico concluded that the panels didn't help change behavior.

Fraser and others dismiss such studies, trusting instead the number of times DUI offenders have come up to them after panels to hug or promise they won't drink and drive again. If he can keep even one drunken driver off the road, he's making a difference, said Fraser, who began speaking at panels two years ago.

"It does work," said Shirley Anderson of Bothell, whose son Mark died in a drunken-driving crash 25 years ago. "It may only be this month, this week, three days, but in that time, how many people's lives have been saved?"

Anderson helped start the first court-ordered victim impact panel in 1984, believed to be the first in the nation. Mothers Against Drunk Driving published a how-to manual in late 1980s, and now there are about 200 MADD panels in the country.

On this Tuesday night in Bellevue, most listen attentively as Anderson describes the pain of losing her 23-year-old son, who was in the Air Force. One young woman idly twirls her hair, while another man fiddles with the contents of his wallet.

Anderson reads from her son's death certificate. She says his death was like a rock thrown in a pond, its ripples affecting at least 59 people -- siblings, parents, aunts and uncles. She tells participants that whenever she sees a Volkswagen Rabbit, the car her son was riding in when he was killed, she still wonders, "Did he scream or holler or yell or jump to the side?" Her words seem to chill the room.

Bereaved family members or injured victims typically speak. Sometimes the panelists are drunken drivers themselves, like Gene, who asked that his last name not be published. He served 42 months in a Walla Walla prison for killing his best friend in a drunken-driving crash. Pacing the front of the church, he described how a bar-hopping night turned deadly. After hitting five taverns, he passed out at the wheel and woke to find his best friend dead across his lap, a 16-inch gash in his chest and his body pierced by a section of guardrail.

"I am living proof," he tells them. "This kind of thing can and will happen to you."

Such stories are intended to remind and shock people to change their behaviors. But Denise Wheeler, a senior researcher at the University of New Mexico's Center on Alcoholism, Substance Abuse and Addictions, said people who drink and drive often have serious alcohol problems that can't be addressed in a "one-shot talk."

"Guilt does not make people change their behavior," said Wheeler, co-author of the two randomized studies, which were presented at the International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety in Montreal last year.

In a two-year study of 532 participants, researchers found that multiple offenders were more likely to be re-arrested for a DUI, and those who had attended a panel reported more drinking and driving one and two years later.

"If we feel that we can save one person's life or change one person's mind, we need to keep doing that," countered Tracy McMillan, coordinator of the DUI Task Force in Snohomish County, whose panels draw more than 2,400 people each year.

Victims who speak say the process is a cathartic one, helping them to cope with their loss.

"It's remarkable how healing it was," said Fraser, 50, who works for Boeing. "I had to find an outlet. This has filled a void in my life."

At the end of the night, many in the audience lined up to hug and thank the speakers. A few headed for the door to pick up their receipt, proof of attendance for the courts.

One 21-year-old man, who would not give his name, cried and told Fraser that the talk had changed his life. The panel was the second he has attended. He said the first time he went, after a DUI arrest in 2001, he didn't think he had a drinking problem and frankly didn't care. He injured someone four months ago when he drove with a 0.2 blood alcohol level -- 0.08 is the legal limit in Washington. He was so drunk, he said, that he didn't know how he got to jail the next morning.

"Hopefully, I'll be able to learn from this one," he said, clutching an Alcoholics Anonymous book. He prayed at the beginning of the night that the words would sink in, he said.

Jason, who didn't want his last name published, listened from his seat in the last row and said it was sobering to hear the accounts. "It's an embarrassment on my part. I should've known better," said the 33-year-old, who was "definitely impaired" when he got stopped after beers one night with his buddies. "I just want to get the whole case cleared up and do the right thing."

Before leaving, the offenders were asked to pick up a red ribbon if they could commit to not drinking and driving. A few dozen did. They also were asked to fill out comment sheets about the session.

In one comment card, a 41-year-old warehouse fork-lift driver scribbled: "I pray and will try very hard not to drink and drive."

Wrote a 20-year-old man who is in school: "I did not want to come here because I thought it would be a waste of time, but I listened and now I thank the speakers because they honestly made a change in the decisions of my future." - -

Shirley Anderson was instrumental in the helping IDIPIC to form. :)