



OLR RESEARCH REPORT

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OLR BACKGROUNDER: CONNECTICUT ANTI-TEXTING INITIATIVES

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The state Department of Transportation (DOT) has received a \$275,000 federal grant to conduct a high-visibility anti-texting campaign in the Danbury area that builds on the findings of an earlier Hartford-area project targeting illegal cell phone use. This report summarizes DOT's grant proposal and the results of the 2010-2011 Hartford area project, during which the percentage of drivers observed texting decreased 72%.

HARTFORD DEMONSTRATION PROJECT (2010-11)

Method

In 2009, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated that 5% of drivers nationwide were using a hand-held cell phone while driving at any given daytime hour. Distracted driving increases the likelihood of a crash, and even experienced drivers who divert their eyes from the road for longer than two seconds increase their crash risk.

NHTSA awarded two \$200,000 grants, one to Hartford, and one to Syracuse, New York, to conduct and evaluate a high-visibility enforcement model aimed at distracted driving. New York and Connecticut each contributed another \$100,000 to the projects.

The Hartford project, which included East Hartford and West Hartford, as well as Hartford, focused on both cell phone calls and texting. This report focuses on the texting component.

The purpose of the Hartford project was to determine whether:

- “high-visibility enforcement” could help modify driver behavior;
- law enforcement would be able to observe cell phone violations (calling or texting); and
- the high-visibility enforcement campaign would increase drivers’ perceived risk of receiving a citation for violating the law.

“High-visibility enforcement” combines (1) dedicated law enforcement during a specified period, (2) a media campaign with an enforcement-based message, and (3) project evaluation.

“High-visibility enforcement campaigns are a proven countermeasure to change drivers’ behavior quickly,” NHTSA said. “The intent of high-visibility enforcement is not to issue tickets, but to take advantage of motorists’ desire to avoid citations or escalating fines for repeat offenders.”

The high-visibility enforcement model “seeks to deter drivers from engaging in a particular behavior in the first place, and is most effective when there is a high certainty that motorists will receive a ticket when they violate the law,” it said.

The Hartford project involved four separate enforcement “waves” in April, July, and October 2010, and in March-April 2011, as well as a public education campaign.

The NHTSA project summary (available on-line at <http://www.distraction.gov/download/research-pdf/508-research-note-dot-hs-811-845.pdf>) notes that police in the Hartford area used a “spotter” technique, in which an officer, usually on the side of a road, radioed ahead to another officer when he observed a driver using a cell phone. The second officer would then stop the driver and issue a ticket.

Syracuse, on the other hand, opted to use roving patrols, unmarked vehicles, and SUVs from which police had a higher vantage point and could better spot violators.

Both Connecticut and New York law enforcement officials found that having the flexibility to schedule overtime shifts was critical to success.

Results of the Hartford Project on Illegal Texting

In the Hartford area, the percentage of drivers seen texting decreased 72%, from 3.9% to 1.1%, from the start of the first enforcement wave to the end of the fourth enforcement wave. Observers also counted significantly fewer drivers in the Hartford area manipulating their cell phones at the end of each enforcement wave than at its start.

Among the lessons learned from the Hartford project, NHTSA said, were that:

- Targeted enforcement using stationary patrols, spotters, and roving patrols can result in high levels of observed violations. The Hartford patrols moved between locations to take advantage of traffic patterns and known high-risk areas during morning and afternoon rush hours.
- Drivers who text frequently commit other traffic violations, such as drifting from one lane to another, driving too slowly, or weaving between lanes. These behaviors can tip police off to drivers who may be violating the texting law.
- Extensive community outreach and public education between enforcement waves creates and reinforces the idea that using cell phones or texting is unacceptable. Public awareness can be raised in this way in a short time.

However, the report made one disturbing finding: motorists continue to call and text while at the same time agreeing that police should vigorously enforce cell phone and texting laws. “Changing drivers’ assessment of the risk associated with their own behavior presents a challenge,” NHTSA said.

DANBURY AREA ANTI-TEXTING GRANT

Announcement and Purpose

In October 2012, NHTSA announced that Connecticut was one of two states to receive a \$275,000 federal grant for an anti-texting enforcement demonstration project. The project, planned for the Danbury, Monroe, Newtown, and Trumbull area, will build on the findings of the 2010-2011 Hartford area project.

In announcing the awards, NHTSA said “the demonstration grants...call for Connecticut and Massachusetts to develop anti-texting enforcement protocols and techniques, such as using stationary patrols, spotters on overpasses on elevated roadways, and roving patrols, to test their effectiveness in four successive waves of high-visibility enforcement activities over a 24-month period. The results...will be documented for the benefit of other states...facing the same challenges.”

NHTSA said such demonstration programs are needed because the earlier Hartford and Syracuse projects found “it is more challenging to detect a driver texting...compared to talking on a handheld device.” Only about 5% of the citations issued during the earlier enforcement projects were for texting violations, it said.

The new demonstration programs “will help identify real-world protocols and practices to better detect if a person is texting while driving,” NHTSA said.

DOT’s Highway Safety Office (HSO), which received the grant, says it expects the Connecticut project to start in June 2013.

In addition to the \$275,000 federal grant, HSO plans to use \$50,000 in DOT matching funds and \$81,250 in matching funds from participating law enforcement agencies for the project. The total budget will be \$406,250, or about \$100,000 per enforcement wave. The HSO will use this money for overtime to maximize the impact of the high-visibility enforcement.

Need

In its grant application, HSO noted that while “law enforcement has been actively ticketing mobile phone violators” and HSO has distributed anti-texting materials, there has not been a “concerted effort [coupling] a strong media campaign with...a high-visibility enforcement wave to make the kind of strong impact to change behavior, attitudes, and awareness on the scale of the previous [Hartford area] demonstration.”

According to the grant application, local police departments issued a total of 24,052 citations for violating the state’s cell phone law (CGS § [14-296aa](#)) in FY 12; state police issued an additional 6,704 citations, for a total of 30,756. Nevertheless, HSO said, texting “continues to occur at unprecedented levels on Connecticut roadways.” (In 2010, it notes, people in the U.S. sent more than 2.2 trillion text messages.)

Goals and Methods

HSO's grant application sets the following goals:

- reducing crashes resulting in deaths and injuries as a result of cell phone use, specifically texting;
- increasing public awareness of the dangers of distracted driving;
- changing motorists' attitudes toward texting while driving; and
- increasing high-visibility enforcement, and educating law enforcement agencies on the identification and citation of offenders.

Among the the methods HSO plans to employ to achieve these goals are:

- conducting four high-visibility enforcement waves during high volume traffic;
- employing focused patrols with spotters, and expanding tactics to include roving patrols and use of SUVs;
- working with NHTSA and an expert panel to identify and train officers to enforce texting and cell phone laws;
- adding a component to the Police Officers Standards and Training Council high-visibility enforcement course to include identifying and enforcing cell phone laws; and
- partnering with the Department of Motor Vehicles to enforce cell phones laws for commercial vehicles.

HSO also will work with NHTSA to buy media time to publicize the anti-texting message.

Assessment

While Connecticut does not now collect distracted driver data on its crash reporting forms, HSO said the data will be collected for the demonstration project. HSO will work with the Judicial Branch's Central Infractions Bureau to provide citation data on each wave.

HSO said it will consider the project successful if there is a reduction in motor vehicle crashes due to driver distraction, specifically texting while driving; a statistically significant reduction in observed texting activity; and an increased awareness on the part of Connecticut drivers of the dangers of distracted driving behaviors, specifically texting. In addition, HSO said, the project will help police better understand how to combat illegal texting.

At the project's conclusion HSO will work with law enforcement in the project area and statewide to continue sustained enforcement using successful tactics and operations identified by project.

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