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DRUG-FREE WORKPLACE ADVISOR

AN ONGOING SERIES TO PROTECT YOUR COMPANY BY HELPING TO KEEP DRUGS OUT OF YOUR WORK-

Drunk Driving: The Risks are Exponential

What makes a drunken driver really drunk? That question was highlighted by Mothers Against Drunk Driving's decision Monday to remove a liquor-industry-funded group from a high-profile campaign to prevent drinkers from taking the wheel. The group, called the Century Council, argues on its Web site that hard-core drunken drivers cause most alcohol-related traffic deaths, and therefore any crackdown should focus on them. But there is a big question about that approach: How do you identify really drunken drivers before it is too late? Drunken drivers are rarely nabbed. When they are caught, it may be after one of their milder binges. And even if they are tested, the legal limits are somewhat imprecise -- one size doesn't fit all.



The dispute over crash statistics is complicated by the number universally used to measure drunken driving: blood alcohol content. It is rarely monitored by drivers and poorly understood even by the most sober

minds. Despite this confusion and the fuzziness of test results, penalties for drunken driving tend to be more black-and-white than for speeding fines, which increase as speed

"... drivers at 0.15 or higher were about 400 times more likely to die in a crash."

does. MADD split with the Century Council because the two groups disagreed about a penalty requiring drivers caught above the limit to install an ignition interlock, a device that prevents those convicted from driving whenever their breath alcohol is too high. The liquor-backed group told several states it only supported this measure for the most hard-core drivers. These include repeat-offenders and people whose blood alcohol content exceeds 0.15 grams per deciliter of blood -- a much higher level of alcohol content than the legal limit of 0.08.

The basis for the Century Council's hard-core threshold comes from government tests of drivers involved in alcohol-related fatal crashes in 2007, showing three out of five had a BAC of at least 0.15. Other research establishes that these heavy drinkers are far more dangerous than other

drunken drivers on the road. Paul Zador, a statistician at the research company Westat, has compared the blood-alcohol levels of drivers killed in crashes with levels of drivers stopped for random roadside testing during peak drunken-driving hours. **That helped him estimate how likely it is that an extra drink will prove fatal.** Compared with sober drivers, drivers at 0.15 or higher were about 400 times more likely to die in a crash. Drivers with levels between 0.10 and 0.14 were 50 times more likely than sober drivers to die in a crash.

These troubling rates, cited by the Century Council in its campaign against hard-core drunken drivers, might overstate the role of alcohol in killing heavy drinkers. As Dr. Zador notes, the same personality traits that lead to driving while highly intoxicated are probably tied to other risky behavior behind the wheel. These drivers are likely dangerous even before they have had their first sip. And drawing the line legally at 0.15 assumes that it is a magic number identifying habitual drunken drivers. Researchers estimate that there is just one drunken-driving arrest for every 80 to 300 trips taken by drunken drivers. The Century Council itself says that there are 1,000 to 2,000 drunken trips per arrest in low-enforcement zones. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study published this month found that passengers report 290 million annual epi-

sodes of impaired driving, or 200 for every arrest.

Source: Wall St. Journal
For further information, see

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