

NHTSA Occupant Protection and Speed Mini-grant Debriefing

Operation S.A.F.E. focused to increase safety belt awareness and compliance for everyone. Smithfield Police implemented a diversion plan to increase safety belt education and awareness and also to remove the stigma that citations are just a revenue maker. This grant was designed to show that the Smithfield Police care enough to educate and raise safety belt awareness that the Police Chief authorized prosecution to dismiss seat belt citations if motorists attended a 2 hour class on occupant safety provided that the motorists met the criteria of no more than 3 motor vehicle citations in the last three years and not more than one citation within the last year. The diversion class was held the fourth Saturday of each month. The last class was held October 26, 2013 which concludes the enforcement aspect of the grant.

The enforcement strategy was to heavily enforce seatbelt violations.

I used the term "contacts" as motor vehicle stops in the activity report.

Officers used strategies as sitting at the busiest intersections, near local schools, colleges, shopping centers, and Interstate Highways; as well as, near the Variable Message Boards which indicated "SEATBELT ENFORCEMENT" "BUCKLE UP" "OPERATION S.A.F.E."

Seatbelt enforcement was best during daylight hours and from a high vantage point or where traffic had to stop at traffic lights or stop signs.

Seatbelt enforcement was least effective during night time low light times. Visibility began to be a problem as it was easier for officers to see into vehicles with daylight versus any artificial lights (street lights, flashlights etc.) To overcome the light obstacle I allowed some of the detail times to be changed at the officer's discretion as long as they provided enforcement in four hour blocks.

The only real obstacles were not having the finances to implement every program we thought we would be able to do. Examples were education in all schools from kindergarten- College. Advertising in schools, social events, and sporting events. The seatbelt fine being reduced from \$85 dollars to \$40 dollars proved to be no obstacle other than some confusion by the motorists because the State of RI did not advertise the change or even update state websites with the correct information. I was actually surprised that the diversion class continued to have good attendance even though the fine was reduced. For some people, it was still worth it for motorists to attend the class and have the charge dismissed.

The most successful program was our diversion program. The community loved the class and provided great class participation. It was an achievement to bring the community and police together to discuss real reasons why the public isn't wearing seatbelts. What better way than to get the truth from the motorists own mouth about why they didn't wear their seatbelt the day they were stopped. Occupant safety class averaged approximately two hours and covered education about seatbelts, car seats,

supplemental restraint systems etc. We answered frequently asked questions- (Why do children in school busses not have to wear seatbelts) etc. Videos were shown proving even the best drivers in the world can be victims to crashes. Other topics covered were Ejection and how to safely wear a seatbelt, and install a car seat correctly.

Public outreach programs were limited due to the lack of finances in the grant. Paying for officers overtime was the biggest obstacle. Media was invited to a S.A.F.E. diversion class to help advertise and promote the grant; however, the media unfortunately did not show up.

I did like the fact that this grant allowed for non-traditional methods to reduce the number of unrestrained operators and passengers in motor vehicles. I felt that I was able to customize a program that worked well in my community and Operation S.A.F.E. could be replicated in other communities around the United States. I did feel that there was a good support system in place to answer any questions that I had along the way. I was able to directly call people when I had a problem with the website or send a quick e-mail for clarification. I met many nice people and feel that I could network with some in the future. I truly believe everyone involved had nothing but good intentions and were teamed together for one common goal of limiting the number of deaths and injuries of unrestrained occupants of motor vehicles.

I am truly glad I was able to participate in the grant and feel I was able to help lower the number of unrestrained occupants. I look forward to reviewing the final statistics, but just in speaking with my officers and getting feedback, I have learned it has gotten much more difficult for them to locate and cite motorists for seat belt violations since the grant began. I have even personally run across motorists that I recognized from teaching at the occupant safety diversion class on the road to see that they are now complying with the seatbelt laws. It seems that once the police and community are brought together in a diversion class, the motorists and police begin to feel a sense of more accountability to each other. Sometimes once one puts a face and a name on a police officer, and may get to know them a little through a two hour class, one feels accountable for his or her actions of wearing a seatbelt. By the same token, Police get to know the people that are on the roadways and can understand that they need to work together with the community to come to the common goal of saving lives and reducing injuries. Just as the public has misconceptions about police, the police can have misconceptions about the public. Once we communicate to each other the need for occupant safety, we can make the roadways a safer place. This was an overall great experience for me and I have learned from others and had the opportunity to share my experiences with them.

I will end this debriefing as I have ended each Operation S.A.F.E. class. Thank you for attending the class. Before you leave, I just want to take the opportunity to tell you that one of the reasons that I got involved with this grant, other than attempting to lower the number of unrestrained motorists for the good of the public is because I was involved in a terrible motor vehicle collision while I was on duty a few years ago. I was wearing my seatbelt and am still alive today to tell you about it. I was in a patrol car responding to a routine call for service. There was no emergency, no lights and sirens, and I was

travelling at the posted speed limit. I was struck by a motorist that suffered from a medical condition. Their vehicle crossed the double yellow lines and hit me head on. I sustained moderate injuries and had to be cut out of my patrol car. As you now know, sometimes you don't have to be doing anything wrong to be involved in a collision. These accidents can happen to anyone at anytime. A seatbelt will not always save your life; however it saved my life and if I didn't wear it that day I would not be here talking to you today. Remember accidents can happen to anyone at anytime and if you don't want to wear a seatbelt to protect yourself, wear it for the loved ones you have that may be left behind if you don't wear it. We all have someone that cares about us, wear it for them. Thank you for your time, please buckle up and drive safely.