



Denham Springs's DWI arrests up 71 percent in '07

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DENHAM SPRINGS — The number of DWI arrests rose 71 percent in the city last year with many of the arrests involving prescription drugs rather than alcohol, according to police.

Of the 108 arrests on driving while intoxicated, records show that at least 20 involved prescription drugs, Police Chief Jeff Wesley said.

The arrests included people driving their children to school while taking anti-anxiety medication and workers on their way to their jobs while under the influence of pain pills, Wesley said.

City Prosecutor David Guidry said that often people are under the misconception that because they have a prescription for a drug that it is legal for them to drive while taking it.

That's not the case if the drug impairs their driving, Guidry said.

"They should not be driving," Wesley said of the people arrested. "Some of these drugs can significantly impair drivers. Often they don't realize the affect the drugs have on their minds and on their ability to concentrate."

Unlike arrests for driving under the influence of alcohol, the arrests for driving while impaired by prescription drugs are showing up more during daylight hours, Wesley said.

Some of the arrests came after people were involved in an accident and the officer realized they were impaired, he said.

Often the arrests come after police officers noticed erratic driving, Wesley said.

When drivers under the influence of drugs get out of their vehicles they sometimes appear to be moving in slow motion, the police chief said.

Many have slurred speech and difficulty standing without holding onto something, he added.

"The physical manifestations are very much like a person who has been drinking, except there is no smell of alcohol," Wesley said.

The people appear to be drunk, but breath tests don't indicate alcohol, he said. Generally urine tests show they have been taking drugs for pain, depression or anxiety, Wesley said.

Sometimes people have taken drugs for more than one of those problems or have taken more than the prescribed dosage, he said.

Prosecution of these cases can be more difficult, said District Attorney Scott Perrilloux of the 21st Judicial District. For one thing, the voluntary urine test shows the presence of drugs, but not the amount, he said.

Prosecutors often have to build their cases on the field sobriety tests given by the officers, Perrilloux said.

Video and audiotapes of those tests taken by officers can help in the prosecutions, Guidry said.

Sometimes the audiotapes are most helpful because of what the people say on them and “how they say it,” the city prosecutor said.

The videos are most helpful when the people are very “intoxicated and nearly falling down,” Guidry said.

Unfortunately, jurors may have the perception that a person “has to be in a falling down, drunken state in order to be guilty of driving under the influence,” Perrilloux said.

The issue is whether they are impaired, he added.

“It’s an increasing problem,” Perrilloux said of people driving while impaired by prescription drugs.

Wesley agreed. That increase, along with having more officers on the streets resulted in the city’s increase in DWI arrests last year, Wesley said.

The total number of DWI arrests in the city rose from 63 in 2006 to 108 in 2007, according to police.

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