



Drug-abusing drivers emerging as menace to safety

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CHARLESTON — Motorists weaving down a highway with too many drinks under their belts pose a serious problem for sober drivers, police and West Virginia lawmakers.

Yet, there's another societal problem Mark Neil raised in a Monday meeting of a legislative panel dealing with drunken drivers — drug abuse while operating a motor vehicle.

Neil, a former assistant prosecutor in Raleigh County, and now the senior attorney for the American Prosecutors Research Institute in Alexandria, Va., advised Judiciary Subcommittee C that drug-abusing drivers are emerging into a definite menace.

One police officer in Logan County recently told him he had made no arrests for DUI but had busted 47 other motorists for driving under the influence of drugs.

Neil suggested the panel look at amending state law so that drug experts can be sent to the scene of a motorist pulled over on a suspicion of driving impaired by narcotics.

"I'm not in favor of running around and sticking a needle in everybody's arm," he emphasized.

Yet, the former prosecutor said, some drivers are getting behind the wheel after ingesting a variety of illegal drugs — crack cocaine, heroin, OxyContin and methamphetamines.

Neil described the method of testing as a sophisticated procedure that entails a dozen steps.

"That is something I would strongly recommend the Legislature consider adopting," he said.

Neil told one panelist, Delegate John Pino, D-Fayette, that a number of police officers are specialists in detecting drug use and "are ready to go," if the law can be revised to allow them to do this.

"No one in the Legislature is unaware of the problem drugs have become in our society," Pino said.

Afterward, Sen. Mike Green, D-Raleigh, a former Beckley officer, observed, "If that's an issue today, I think we need to look at it.

"It's a super highly technical crime to prove," Green said.

As for drunken drivers, Green said the field sobriety test has proven its worthiness.

"I don't recall any time that someone was arrested and the BAC level from the Breathalyzer didn't support the field sobriety test," he said.

"Through my experience, the field sobriety has been supported by the breath test back at the station."

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