Project Year 2023/2024

Blood Alcohol Concentration in Texas: Improving Medical Examiner Office and County Performance

JPs and ME offices do not consistently report driver BAC toxicology results to TxDOT; without reported BAC test results, TxDOT cannot confirm whether alcohol or drugs are contributing factors to fatal crashes or accurately target interventions for impaired driving.

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Project Need and Approach

In 2021, over 11,600 people lost their lives in crashes involving at least one alcohol-impaired driver, accounting for 30 percent of all traffic fatalities nationally. Additionally, police-reported fatalities involving alcohol-related crashes increased 5 percent in 2021 compared to 2020. However, without reported blood alcohol content (BAC) test results, little evidence exists to confirm whether alcohol or drugs were contributing factors to these fatal crashes. Data extracted in April 2021, reflecting 2019 data, revealed that approximately 51 percent of BAC toxicology results were known, 5 percent were unknown, and 44 percent were not tested. These data suggested a 25 percent increase in motor vehicle fatal crashes with *suspected* impairment although no BAC toxicology data was collected to confirm. In 63 percent of cases, BAC tests were requested but no results were submitted to the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). Known BAC results are critical in targeting interventions for impaired driving.

The Texas A&M Transportation Institute (TTI) offered to support TxDOT in achieving a more seamless data transfer process, which will help improve the accuracy, timeliness, and completeness of data received by the State. TTI reached out to death investigators (justices of the peace [JPs] and medical examiner [ME] offices) to ensure their BAC and toxicology data are accurately and appropriately reported to TxDOT.

The purpose of the project was to improve Blood Alcohol Content reporting by Justices of the Peace and Medical Examiner offices to the Texas Department of Transportation.

Project Activities

TTI evaluated the BAC reporting processes of JPs and ME offices in 25 jurisdictions with the most alcohol-impaired driving fatalities/serious injuries to determine reporting barriers faced by these jurisdictions. The project team found that 100 percent of the ME offices who responded to the survey reported not knowing about the statutory requirement to submit toxicology results to TxDOT. Only 77 percent of JPs who responded to the survey were aware of the same requirement, despite attending annual training. Additionally, only 55 percent of participating JPs knew that if they submitted toxicology results to TxDOT by email, they would receive confirmation from TxDOT indicating that the results had been received. Some JPs reported that they would always order toxicology testing on all fatal drivers from a crash; others would not request testing to be conducted unless evidence existed at the scene of the impairment or crime.

To address these gaps, TTI developed and distributed educational materials to 254 death investigator offices to emphasize the importance of BAC and toxicology data and suggest ways to collaborate with law enforcement agencies to improve BAC reporting rates. The project team analyzed 2023 fatal crash data that showed a concerning rise in alcohol-related fatalities, peaking in 2022 with 741 deaths. TTI also improved BAC reporting rates by identifying missing data from alcohol-related crashes and requesting these data from death investigators, leading to a 68 percent improvement in BAC reporting for 2023. The project culminated in a final comprehensive report detailing these efforts.

Benefits to Texas Transportation Safety

The results of this project supported transportation safety in Texas by improving the accuracy and completeness of BAC reporting for fatal crashes. By addressing reporting gaps and ensuring more timely submission of toxicology results to TxDOT, the project enhanced the State's ability to identify impaired driving trends and target high-risk areas for intervention.

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For More Information

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