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DWI Courts Save Lives

Alexandria, VA – September 15, 2008 – Last month the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) released its annual traffic safety assessment for 2007. The report shows a remarkable 3.7% decrease in alcohol-impaired driving fatalities since last year but revealed a startling trend among the nation's most dangerous offenders.

The encouraging 3.7% drop is owed to a number of factors including the diligence of law enforcement and the effectiveness of our court system in appropriately sanctioning social drinkers arrested for drunk driving. In addition, awareness groups have become increasingly innovative in promoting the message of zero tolerance for impaired driving and the importance of designated drivers.

Unfortunately traditional sanctions have little effect on drivers with a prior DWI conviction and those whose blood alcohol content (BAC) is .15 or above. Research has proven these high-risk drivers to be unresponsive to general and legal deterrence. This year's NHTSA assessment validates these findings.

The number of fatal crashes involving impaired drivers with a prior DWI conviction remained unchanged from the year before and half of all impaired drivers involved in these crashes had a BAC of .16 or above, just shy of the 2006 mark.

These drivers are not the most common but they are by far the most dangerous. According to a NHTSA report released in early 2008 "drivers with prior DWI convictions are overrepresented in fatal crashes and have a greater relative risk of involvement in a fatal crash."

There is a clear need for a court system that specifically addresses high-risk offenders and the addiction that keeps them from changing their behavior. DWI Courts are the solution.

DWI Courts target high-risk offenders. Defendants in DWI Courts receive the treatment they require to stay clean and sober and never get back behind the wheel of a vehicle impaired. But treatment is only half the strategy. Accountability is critical and brought to bear by a specially trained judge where DWI offenders are required to meet their own

obligations to society, themselves and their families. They are regularly tested for alcohol use, required to appear in court for the judge weekly to review their progress, and receive rewards for doing well and sanctions for not living up to their obligations. A 2007 study by the Michigan Supreme Court, found that offenders sentenced to traditional probation were nineteen times more likely to be re-arrested for a DUI charge than a DWI court participant.

Nearly 450 such courts exist nationwide. “These courts are changing the behavior of the high-risk drinking drivers” said David Wallace, Director of the National Center for DWI Courts (NCDC). “The fact that the number of fatal crashes involving these drivers has not changed is unacceptable. We’ve been doing the same thing for years with these individuals and it has not worked. It is time for a change. DWI courts are that change and must be expanded throughout the country.”