



Officers trained to detect telltale signs of drug abuse

By Tona Kunz | Daily Herald Staff

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A new car sat with its grille wrapped around a fire hydrant in Woodridge.

An unconscious, well-dressed, 47-year-old man from Glen Ellyn was slumped inside. Heart attack, Sgt. Bruce Talbot thought.

Then he saw the crack pipe between the man's legs.

The man was one of tens of thousands of drugged drivers estimated to be on roads across the country daily.

But few drivers give such obvious indications of their impairment.

Because drug use can leave only subtle signs, police detect less than one-third of drugged drivers, Talbot said.

Through inroads in police training, Talbot and other police trainers like him hope to bring drugged driving awareness and arrests in line with where drunken driving is today.

The key is the same in both: an officer's keen eyesight.

It's harder to convict drugged drivers than drunken drivers.

Because the U.S. Department of Justice has yet to approve a roadside test for drugs similar to a Breathalyzer, the court battle can often hinge solely on the officer's observations.

Talbot teaches the only drug-impaired driver detection program certified by the Illinois Law Enforcement Officer's Training and Standards Board. To help officers retrain their way of thinking about traffic stops, he uses examples like the arrest of that Glen Ellyn man he made in the 1990s when he was a Woodridge police officer.

Drugs and alcohol cause the body to react differently. Some reactions can signal the type of drug used.

Officers record muscle tone, eye movement, skin appearance, and mental orientation to the surroundings.

Paramedics and emergency room personnel write down temperatures, pulse rates, blood pressure and respiration rates.

Together the information tells officers what chemicals to look for in the car and helps corroborate prosecutors' claims of impairment.

For example, hands at rest normally have a slight curl to the fingers. But the fingers of methamphetamine and cocaine users stick straight out. Stimulants cause eyelids to tremor. Depressants cause them to sit half-mast. Hallucinogens will cause the skin to become warm, sweaty and flushed.

Drug metabolites can stay in a user's system for up to two weeks.

Proving when the drugs were ingested makes the difference between getting a misdemeanor conviction for driving under the influence and a felony reckless homicide conviction for tying a traffic death to a driver impaired at the moment of the crash.

Talbot teaches police to look for telltale signs of recent ingestion. Cocaine users will have what appears like dirt on their nose hairs from chemicals used to dilute the drug. Marijuana smokers will have raised taste buds, similar to goose bumps and a tongue coated with tar residue. The color and amount of scabbing of an injection wound can pinpoint needle use to within a few hours.