



MESQUITE COURTS TRAFFIC SAFETY WITH INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES

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Traffic safety and impaired driving are challenges faced by all municipalities. The burden to address these problems is typically shouldered by law enforcement, but this approach is limited in effectiveness and open to many missed opportunities. Traffic officers are not alone on the front line. Municipal court judges, clerks, and attendants are also "in the trenches," encountering traffic violations, accidents, and the consequences that follow. Naturally, this produces an environment that encourages innovative ideas.

The City of Mesquite Municipal Court was recently honored with a 2016 Municipal Traffic Safety Initiatives Award from the Texas Municipal Courts Education Center (TMCEC) for outstanding contributions to increase traffic safety. The court was recognized for a number of innovative and proactive programs targeting a variety of population groups.

A day in the life

It is often said "we learn by doing," and this is the approach taken by the city's Student Government Days program. Every spring, groups of students from the city's five high schools visit city offices, and emulate the jobs of various officials and staff. The Mesquite Municipal Court participates in the program and is "staffed" by a student judge, prosecutor, defense attorney, defendant, and bailiff. City officials and staff shadow the students to assist them, and

thoroughly enjoy the day. After the students meet with the judge and prosecutors to prepare for their roles, a mock trial is held.

A traffic case proceeds and the students are tasked with selecting a jury of their peers. A certified peace officer testifies at the trial, demonstrates the use of a radar speed gun, and an authentic dash-cam video is shown. The students learn about the legal process at the municipal level, view evidence, and hear testimony on the dangers and consequences of speeding.

Everyone likes a gift

Knowing the universal appeal of give-a-ways, the Mesquite Municipal Court requested free materials offered by the TMCEC for clerks to distribute to defendants and citizens. These items included pens, compact mirrors, hand sanitizers, and identification card holders promoting traffic safety. General population visitors to court during Municipal Courts Week also have the opportunity to select a treat stapled to information brochures about driving intoxicated and seat-belt safety.



Embracing social media

Using social media to our advantage, a three-minute Transport Accident Commission (TAC) YouTube video called "Everyone Hurts When You Speed" is shown at the beginning of the judge's juvenile and show cause dockets. The video shows how speeding can result in something much more tragic than a citation, as well as the impact a traffic accident can have on a community. Court Administrator Lidia Barraza worked in-house to add Spanish subtitles to the video to ensure all court attendees would be able to understand the important message.

Seeing is believing

How do you educate young drivers to the dangers of drunk driving? By playing "Will a buzz throw you off your game?" Judge Steve Crane and Senior Municipal Court Clerk Rebecca Taylor are to be thanked for this innovative idea and catch phrase. All that is needed to play is a bean-bag-toss game board and a pair of intoxication goggles from TMCEC. The game and exhibit tables are set up in Mesquite's five high schools during Municipal Courts Week. The game is by far the biggest hit of the event, and leaves the students with a lasting memory. Mesquite Marshal Michael Meek explains the impact best, "I think more than anything that I took away from this experience was the number of students that made the statement 'if this is what it feels like to be drunk, I don't want any part of it.'"

Putting technology to work

The successful prosecution of a drunk driver often hinges on the timely administration of a blood alcohol test, but

obtaining a blood warrant is not a speedy process. Most offenses occur late at night when most judges are home sleeping. The presiding judge and associate judges are on call at all times to review and sign warrants, but middle-of-the-night wake-up calls slow down the process. At least, this was the case until the Mesquite Police Department and Municipal Court used a bit of ingenuity and technology to speed things along.

In 2015, the department and court established a secure email transmission process using DocuSign for encrypted documents. The incident officer transmits all necessary documents by email and awakens the judge to review the documents. The judge uses Skype to establish a video communication, and the affiant incident officer swears that the contents of the affidavit are true and correct. If the judge determines the search warrant affidavit establishes probable cause, a secure PIN signature, date and time of entry of the search warrant is entered onto the finished document. This process has reduced the warrant process from 90 plus minutes to under 30 minutes.

From role-playing, gifts and games, to technology and enforcement, the arsenal to fight drunk driving and improve traffic safety is immense and growing. Yet, keeping the arsenal strong requires innovative ideas and remembering they can come from a variety of sources.

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