DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES TO CRIME AND TRAFFIC SAFETY PROJECT BIGGER IN TEXAS

There's a saying in Texas that you can always tell a Texan, you just can't tell him much. While that saying is especially true of Texas law enforcement, as it turns out, Texans can occasionally be shown a thing or two.

In the six years working in Texas, IADLEST's Data-Driven Approaches to Crime and Traffic Safety (DDACTS) project, funded through the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), has worked with more than 75 law enforcement agencies, including bringing more than 20 to full implementation of the model and several more to come in FY2021.

The biggest difference between the Texas DDACTS project and other grant-funded projects is the focus on long-term relationships with agencies and sustainability beyond a single grant year. Before any Texas agency's officers receive DDACTS training, that agency's analysts or those acting as analysts undergo a phased series of virtual and in-person training courses focused on developing and building analytical skills. In some cases, the training continues for several months before the agency is ready to take the next step.

"Too often, grant programs are cram sessions, trying to impart as much information as possible in a short amount of time," said IADLEST Project Manager Daniel Howard. "We're asking law enforcement agencies to tear down years of learned behaviors developed within the department based on a few days of intense instruction from outsiders. In most cases, that's too big of a leap for an agency to make."

IADLEST and the TxDOT worked together to develop a new comprehensive project strategy that allowed the Texas DDACTS team to get to know the agency's personnel at all levels, from chief to analyst, while building a sustainable foundation for the agency's long-term success with data-driven operational strategies.

IADLEST Team working with the Command Staff of the Victoria, Tx. Police Department (December 2019)

Early on, it became clear that an agency cannot have a data-driven operational model nor have long-term success without quality data and the ability to analyze it effectively. Therefore, in addition to building analytical capacity, IADLEST helps agencies build confidence in its analysts and the data being analyzed. The program has shifted so heavily toward developing analytical capacity in participating agencies through virtual workshops that the project hardly slowed down even with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its travel-related restrictions.

Meanwhile, TxDOT's Selective Traffic Enforcement Program (STEP) has undergone significant changes in the past three years that have shifted the program's performance measures away from citations and toward meaningful motor vehicle contacts that result in crash reductions. These reductions are accomplished by directing the vehicle contacts the STEP program pays for towards high-crash areas identified in a joint effort between the agency and TxDOT. Further, TxDOT encourages STEP agencies to develop their STEP zones based on their DDACTS zones, which allows those additional enforcement resources to have an impact on a broader spectrum of social harms beyond crashes.

"The public may not necessarily know why a patrol unit is working in an area." Howard said. "What potential criminals and traffic violators know is they do not want to be stopped and so a conspicuous police presence can impact both behaviors through making high-visibility vehicle stops."

Even agencies that cannot yet develop their own analysis can receive crash related data and some basic analysis thanks to a grant-funded TxDOT partnership with the Texas Department of Public Safety's Highway Operations Center (DPS-HSOC), which develops crash heat maps for STEP agencies.

Harlingen, TX. Police Chief Michael Kester addressing his officers as part of the agency's DDACTS workshop. (March 2020)

Additionally, IADLEST's Large Truck & Bus Traffic Enforcement Training (LT&B) program has taken root in Texas over the past few years, especially after TxDOT strongly recommended agencies attend this training prior to working other STEP projects focused on commercial motor vehicles.

Between the changes in STEP, IADLEST's DDACTS, and LT&B projects and the analytical assistance provided by DPS-HSOC, IADLEST, STEP has become a gateway for agencies to explore data-driven enforcement strategies at their own pace. Since the changes to STEP began in FY 2019, the number of STEP project proposals has more than doubled, which includes a 700% increase in STEP-Commercial Motor Vehicle project proposals.

The result of everyone's efforts is the Texas projects are rapidly becoming standing-room only and getting busier each year since it began October 2015. It was difficult to get a good foothold in Texas before STEP changed as the data-driven concept and engagement seemed too far outside the norm for many agencies to grasp.

However, a noticeable change happened when agencies were shown the benefits of programs like STEP, the DPS-HSOC, and IADLEST working in unison as opposed to just being told about them.

Lewisville, TX. Police Chief Kevin Dever addressing his officers as part of his agency's DDACTS workshop. (January 2020)

IADLEST is happy to announce its partnership with TxDOT will continue in FY 2021 with the awarding of $395,000 for the Texas-DDACTS Project and another $105,000 for the LT&BTET project. For more information on the Texas DDACTS or the LT&B project, contact Daniel A. Howard at danhoward@iadlest.org or Larry Krantz at Larry.Krantz@TxDOT.gov