

Traffic Enforcement is Real Police Work

Published in Law and Order, Aug 2008

Recently, while driving to work in the morning, I observed a taxi driver making a turn at an intersection I was approaching. I noticed that the driver wasn't wearing his seat belt. Though I am an assistant police chief, I still make traffic stops and write tickets. Since seat-belt enforcement continues to be a priority for our agency, and to set the example to others, I stopped the taxi.

Upon speaking with the driver, I observed all the obvious signs of intoxication—slurred speech, glassy eyes, odor of alcoholic beverage, you know the rest. After a failed field sobriety test, he was placed under arrest for DUI. Mind you, this was at 7 a.m. and he had a “fare” in the back seat. This is a classic example of how “simple” traffic enforcement can lead to other things.

The Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police has a program called “Looking Beyond the Safety Belt.” The program recognizes law enforcement officers who initiate a traffic stop based solely on a safety-belt violation, which then results in arrests or discovery of other crimes.

Over the past several years, a number of officers have been recognized for some outstanding police work as a result of a “routine” traffic stop of this nature. These officers are recognized each year at the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police summer conference as part of the Illinois Traffic Safety Challenge program. Agencies can nominate an officer at any time during the year.

The IACP has similar programs called “Looking Beyond the License Plate (sponsored by 3M Traffic Safety Systems Division) as well as “Looking Beyond the Traffic Stop.” Details on these programs can be found at www.theiacp.org.

Real Policing

In January 2006, Sergeant Timothy Gretz of the Buffalo Grove, IL Police made a traffic stop on a driver not wearing a seat belt. Gretz noticed two briefcases in the back seat with a business card ID tag attached to one that didn't match the name of the driver. After some questioning, a consent search was allowed. A search of the vehicle revealed proceeds from residential burglaries. The driver was arrested and eventually confessed to 11 burglaries in Buffalo Grove and numerous others in surrounding suburbs of Chicago.

That same month, Illinois State Police Trooper Jason Bevard made a traffic stop on a driver who was not wearing a seat belt. Two passengers were also in the vehicle. Upon stopping, the driver fled on foot and disappeared into a wooded area. One of the passengers was wanted on an active warrant. A search of the vehicle revealed a crack pipe and hypodermic syringes.

After a lengthy investigation, the identity of the driver was determined. Officers also determined that the vehicle was wanted in connection with several burglaries and home invasions as well as a sexual assault. The driver was eventually arrested and pleaded guilty to home invasion and sexual assault and is serving 45 years with the Illinois Department of Corrections. Due to evidence found in the vehicle, the driver was also charged with a murder that occurred in Woodford County, IL.

These are just two examples of excellent police work that happens every day all across the country. Criminals come and go in cars. If you have a problem with gangs, drugs, burglaries, etc., quite often you

can be successful mitigating these problems with an aggressive traffic-enforcement policy. Study after study has shown that more arrests are made as a result of traffic stops than any undercover operation.

Additionally, numerous studies have shown that traffic-related issues continue to be citizen's number one complaint to police.

Traffic enforcement is not just the job of the traffic officer. It should be a strong tool in every officer's toolbox. According to statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 42,000 people were killed in traffic crashes last year in the United States.

Aggressive and proactive traffic enforcement is the greatest tool law enforcement has in preventing crashes, preventing deaths and injuries as a result of crashes, as well as preventing crime. No officer enjoys taking a fatal crash report. Two of our core functions in law enforcement are the prevention of crime and the prevention of traffic crashes.

Taking this issue closer to home, I decided to do a three-year study in Hoffman Estates to determine the number of arrests made as a result of traffic stops initiated solely for a safety-belt violation.

During the period of January 2004 to December 2006, officers made 289 arrests as a result of stops for seat-belt violations. This included 11 DUI arrests, nine drug arrests, 34 misdemeanor and felony warrant arrests and more than 200 drivers with suspended or revoked driver's licenses. This is from a department of 104 total sworn officers with only 55 assigned to the patrol division. These statistics clearly demonstrate that traffic enforcement is, in fact, real police work.

Agencies should take the time re-examine the issues their agencies face and develop strong, clear and non-discriminatory traffic-enforcement policies. I congratulate the officers mentioned above as well as every officer who has made a "routine" traffic stop that was determined to be anything but routine.

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