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DA Receives 3-Year Grant to Expand Anti-DWI Program to All Weekends

Houston, Tx – The Harris County District Attorney’s Office has received funding for a nearly four-fold expansion in the anti-DWI No Refusal initiative, enabling prosecutors and area police agencies to deploy the successful program on every weekend through the next three years, District Attorney Patricia Lykos announced Thursday.

That enhanced initiative begins Friday and continues through the Halloween weekend nights, traditionally a time when impaired drivers can make Harris County streets especially dangerous.

The District Attorney’s Office will continue to cover its costs for operating the No Refusal program for 22 weekend nights annually. That will expand to include the remaining 82 weekend nights yearly, in a \$669,000 federal grant that runs through 2013. The funds, awarded through the Texas Department of Transportation, will pay for 246 No Refusal weekend days over the three-year life of the grant. That is the equivalent of eight months of daily added enforcement.

“In the past, we were limited to 11 weekends. This grant means that every weekend we will fight this crucial war against intoxicated drivers and their lethal legacy of crashes,” District Attorney Lykos said.

Harris County has led the nation in the frequency of alcohol-related traffic crash fatalities. Last year, the District Attorney’s Office filed 13,788 criminal charges involving intoxicated drivers.

New grant funds will pay for deploying two prosecutors, an administrative assistant and a nurse trained in drawing blood. In No Refusal operations, law enforcement agencies in Harris County bring in drivers arrested for DWI. If they decline to voluntarily submit to breath tests, the Assistant District Attorneys and police officers work together to prepare search warrants for a magistrate to authorize mandatory blood draws to determine their intoxication levels. In 2009, 359 No Refusal warrants were issued.

Catherine Evans, Chief of the District Attorney’s Vehicular Crimes Section, said the No Refusal program has repeatedly proven its effectiveness. Prosecutors say more suspects voluntarily consent to breath tests on No Refusal nights. For those who don’t, the blood evidence has boosted conviction rates. It can also reveal types of intoxicants that may not show up in breath tests.

Evans explained that No Refusal may also be deployed on some mid-week holidays or special events typically associated with increased impaired driving. Weekend nights remain the prime target. National statistics from 2008 showed that alcohol was a factor in twice as many fatal crashes – 32 percent -- on weekends, compared to other days.

In a Thursday news conference to announce the grant, District Attorney Lykos commended the cooperation of area law enforcement agencies. Among those represented at the event were the Houston Police Department, Harris County Sheriff’s Office, Texas Department of Public Safety, Pasadena Police Department, La Porte Police Department, and the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission.

Other organizations present included Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Houston-Galveston Area Council, and Bay Area Council on Drugs and Alcohol.

“The ultimate goal of the District Attorney’s Office and our partners is to save lives by having people make safer transportation choices,” Evans said. (end)