

# Operation Westsafe – the Western Sydney Experience

**Renae Elrington<sup>1</sup> (Presenter); Kate Wilson<sup>1</sup> (Presenter)**  
**<sup>1</sup>Roads and Traffic Authority, NSW**

## **Biographies**

Renae Elrington is the Road Safety Manager for the RTA's Sydney Region. Renae is currently responsible for managing the road safety program across Sydney including crash analysis, audits and Blackspot treatments, safety around schools, speed management and road user safety. With over 10 years experience in road safety, Renae was instrumental in the development Operation Westsafe in 2001.

Kate Wilson is the Road User Safety Leader for the Sydney Region of the RTA where she is responsible for leading the development and delivery of behavioural change programs across Sydney. Kate has 10 years experience in the field of road safety and in that time she has been involved in the development of major public education and enforcement programs such as Operation Westsafe as well as overseeing the Local Government Road Safety Program across Sydney.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

During 2000, the Sydney region experienced a 12% increase in road fatalities compared to the previous 3-year average. Fatalities within Sydney contributed to 38% of the total NSW road toll. Of these fatalities 61% occurred within Western Sydney.

In addition, RTA research has indicated that nearly 80% of drivers in fatal crashes in Western Sydney were local residents, and more than half of these were close to home (in the same local government area). Furthermore, the population in Western Sydney is regarded as a "growth area". Its current population is around 1.5 million, representing about 1 in 12 Australians.

In response to the rising road toll during 2000, the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA), Police and the Motor Accidents Authority (MAA) developed an integrated, multi-agency initiative in Western Sydney. Lowering the road toll and reducing injury levels were key targets of the campaign. The program was launched in July 2001. Two years later, in 2003 Operation Westsafe continues to be a major road safety enforcement and public education campaign that addresses the key behaviours of speeding, drink driving and the non-use of restraints.

A central feature of the program is the deployment of up to 60 Police Officers dedicated to the addressing unsafe driving behaviours. The enforcement is supported by a major RTA/MAA public education program, highlighting Police presence and enforcement activity. The Operation is also supported by Local Government.

## **2. PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT**

### **2.1 Strategic Alliances**

Key stakeholders and opinion leaders have been engaged in Operation WestSafe, at State and Local Government levels extending the program to the community level, within the framework of the RTA-funded Road Safety Local Government program.

Police are a critical ingredient of the program through their intelligence-based enforcement of the law with respect to drink driving, speeding, seat-belt compliance, and management of other crime incidents.

The MAA agreed to be a financial partner in the program, supporting their key target of reducing the high number of injuries within Western Sydney.

The RTA has played a significant role facilitating the cooperation of all stakeholders and providing significant resources including public education and enhanced enforcement funding to promote enforcement.

## **2.2 Operation Theme**

“Operation WestSafe” was the name of the operation determined by the Police, as a simple, easily understood name with geographical branding. It clearly captures the intention to make Western Sydney roads safer. The campaign also emphasises the highly visible enforcement in Western Sydney with the theme line “You’re going to get caught”. The logo utilises a blue and white chequerboard design similar to the Police insignia, which immediately focuses the message onto enforcement.

## **3. ENFORCEMENT**

### **3.1 Developing the Enforcement Matrix**

The fundamental aspect of the program is an enforcement calendar or matrix, which consists of a series of up to 60-person strong Police bursts within a 5 to 6 week period.

Police Regional Traffic Coordinators and Traffic Services Group developed the matrix in consultation with RTA, ensuring that all identified black spots in Western Sydney were targeted.

It was agreed that enforcement would be in a rolling series of three days within each week. The initial matrix was for a period of twelve months. A review of the program was conducted after the initial twelve month period. In the subsequent years, the program was refined to a period of four to six weeks for each matrix, with three matrixes per year.

### **3.2 Field Operations**

Over each month of the Operation, there are a total of up to 8,976 hours (enhanced and baseline) committed by the Police.

Each enforcement matrix is supported by two fully equipped RBT Buses, supplied by Traffic Services Branch. This is pivotal in increasing the visibility of the enforcement operation as well as allowing fast and efficient processing of Prescribed Concentration of Alcohol (PCA) offences in the field. Up to 24 mobile patrols were planned to operate around these two stationary sites. Audits of enhanced operations are conducted by the Police and by the RTA over the course of the operation.

### **3.3 Team Communication and Cohesion**

In the early phases of planning, Police meetings were held fortnightly. In later stages, meetings were held with the Police at the end of each matrix refining logistics and locations in preparation for the following matrix. The RTA and Police are currently developing further strategies to involve operational police including the development of communication

materials for distribution. Police operations are also communicated to officers via promotions in the Police Service Weekly.

## **4. PUBLIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

### **4.1 Pre-campaign Research**

The advertising concepts developed for Operation Westsafe were tested amongst male drivers aged 17 to 49 years who were residents of Western Sydney being the predominant program target group. From a communication perspective, key findings included that:

1. It was important to clearly highlight the road safety behaviours to be targeted eg: speeding, drink driving, non-wearing of seatbelts.
2. The logo and Police 'checks' were important as a branding device to help inform motorists of the deterrent nature of the Operation and provide an important cue for the enforcement theme.
3. The use of Western Sydney statistics was essential to provide a community focus for the campaign.

### **4.2 Public Campaign Elements**

The public education support of police enforcement is dependant on a multi-layered approach, based on the enforcement matrix. The goal of communication elements is to raise the public perception of police enforcement and the risk of being caught. A number of campaign elements have been used during the two years of the program. Following is a list of the current campaign elements:

#### **Advertising**

- Radio advertisements: 30 second radio commercials that target specific road safety behaviours, incorporating a strong enforcement message.
- Radio station sponsored Traffic Reports: In the most recent enforcement matrix, sponsored live traffic reports were piloted. Based on their cost-effectiveness and audience reach, this component will be included as an ongoing campaign element.
- Press Advertisements: Scheduled in suburban newspapers with a focus on specific road safety behaviour and incorporating injury and fatality statistics for Western Sydney. Press advertising is placed that builds on these messages and promotes the achievements of Westsafe to date, thanking the community for its support.

#### **Outdoor Public Education**

- Metrolite (Bus Stop) Advertisements: Advertisements individually target speeding, drink driving and seatbelts with strong police branding through the Operation WestSafe logo and the words "You're going to get caught".
- Police Targeting Signs: Police and RTA jointly developed special Operation WestSafe signs for identified locations within the Greater Metro Police Region. The signs emphasise the responsibility of the community to make Western Sydney roads safer. The behaviours to be targeted by Police (speeding, drink driving, seatbelt wearing) are displayed on base plates that are rotated in tandem with the enforcement matrix.
- Variable Message Signs: Mobile electronic variable message signs are deployed at sites around Western Sydney on a rotational basis to support the enforcement matrix. Each site was chosen by Police, based on local police intelligence.

- Bridge banners: Operation WestSafe banners are displayed in high traffic volume locations along key routes and rotated to link with the enforcement matrix.

### **Community Support**

- Local Government: All 13 Local councils in Western Sydney have supported Operation WestSafe. Discussions were held with Road Safety Officers within Local Government and resource kits provided. Funding grants of up to \$3,000 were also offered to individual Council for localised support of WestSafe.
- In-venue education in Licensed Premises: A significant point of promotion for Operation WestSafe anti-drink driving material has been licensed venues in areas identified as a drink drive risk. A program of deploying breath tester machines on a rotational basis is also in place, supported by further promotional materials linking the program to WestSafe.

## **5. UNPAID MEDIA STRATEGY**

The media units of the RTA and NSW Police Service have been proactive in increasing awareness of Operation WestSafe. Media kits containing details of the campaign, relevant statistical information, and copies of campaign launch have been widely disseminated.

Ongoing media attention has been positive and primarily driven by the release of operational statistics, the huge police presence in local areas, and follow-ups by the media units or local journalists.

Suburban newspapers are actively reporting each WestSafe “blitz” when the operation targets their area that keeps interest alive. This has been important in reinforcing the operation’s key messages. The underlining message in all stories is that people are getting caught during Operation WestSafe and will continue to do so if they break the law.

## **6. PROGRAM EVALUATION**

### **6.1 Traffic Infringement Data**

During the past twelve months of the Operation, Police have conducted 40,000 stationary RBT and 7,088 mobile RBT tests. Added to the first twelve months of WestSafe this totals to some 345,758 stationary RBT and 54,518 mobile RBT for drivers and riders in Western Sydney since the launch of the program.

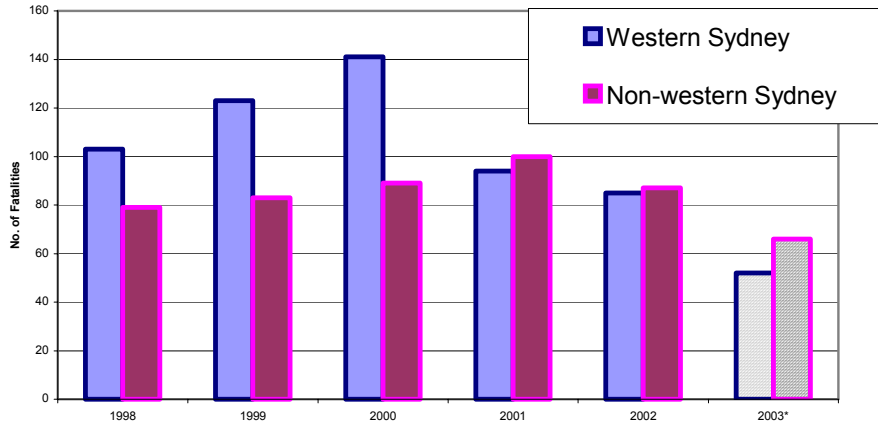
During 2002-03 there were more than 5,000 traffic offences detected including over 2,033 speeding offences. This aggregates to 35,000 traffic offences including 12,533 speeding offences detected across Sydney’s west since the launch.

### **6.2 Crash Data - Fatalities**

The crash data for the first twelve-month period of Operation WestSafe was very positive. The reduction in fatalities in 2001/02 in Sydney was attributable to a reduction in fatalities in Western Sydney. From 2000 to 2001, there was a 33% reduction in fatalities in Western Sydney (141 to 94). This reversed the previous 3-year trend.

For year to date (Jan to Aug, 2003), Western Sydney fatalities were 52. This represents a drop of 29% to the previous 3-year average. In 2001, 2002, and 2003 (Jan to May), Western Sydney fatalities were lower than the rest of Sydney.

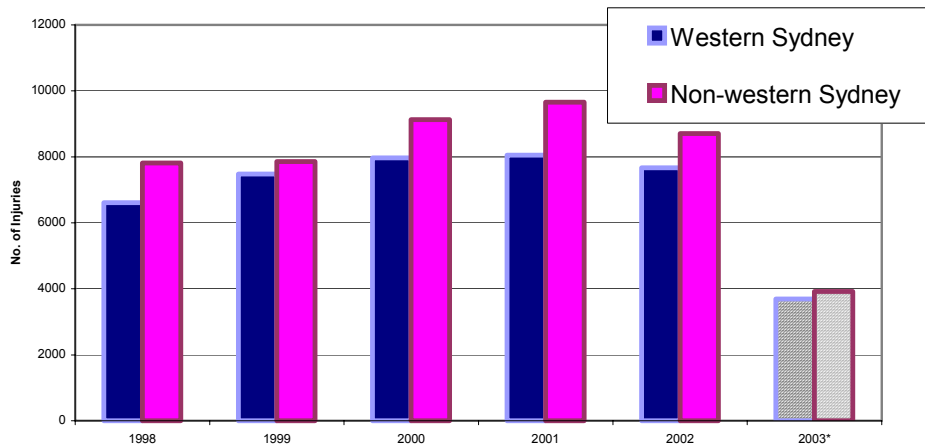
Fatalities in Sydney, 1998 to August 2003\*, Western Sydney v Non-western Sydney.  
 (\* Preliminary, as at 1/9/03)



### 6.3 Crash Data – Injuries

Injuries in Western Sydney fell 5% from 2001 (8054) to 2002. This also reversed the previous 3-year trend. In 2002, injuries dropped a further 2% compared to the previous 3-year average.

Injuries in Sydney, 1998 to August 2003\*, Western Sydney v Non-western Sydney.  
 (\* Provisional & incomplete, as at 1/9/03)



### 6.4 Community Tracking

- Methodology:**  
 A pre-test survey was conducted prior to the commencement of the operation, in mid July 2001. A sample of 200 people (drivers aged 17+) in Western Sydney was interviewed. The pre-test survey benchmarked people's perceptions and experiences of the level of Police presence in Western Sydney, attitudes towards various enforcement and road safety issues and then self-reported behaviours.

During 2001/02, a continuous tracking approach was used for surveying community attitudes. Fifty interviews were conducted each week. A rolling average was then applied to the data so that analysis could be conducted on a sample of 200 in each week.

In 2002/03, the campaign was evaluated using a single fieldwork 'dip', with a sample of 200 each time. The fieldwork took place in the week following the campaign burst.

- Summary of Key Findings (June 2003):

Awareness of specific Police enforcement operations in Western Sydney remains steady at about 25%. This is significantly higher amongst those who recognise the WestSafe advertising, suggesting that the advertising program is working well.

The campaign bursts have coincided with positive trends in terms of people's awareness of Police activity on the roads and their perceived likelihood that offending drivers will be caught. Total campaign awareness appears to have reached its peak at about 73%.

Of the campaign elements, radio advertising consistently achieved very solid cut through results comparable with the best of RTA advertising. Also, bus shelter posters and radio traffic updates have represented good value for money in conveying the campaign message.

There is continued community endorsement of Operation WestSafe. There has been a marked increase in the number of drivers agreeing that "Specific Operations like WestSafe are a good way of making people aware of road safety issues" since September 2002.

Over the life of the campaign there has been a significant increase in Western Sydney drivers stating they have never driven more than 15km/h over the speed limit. Driver compliance with wearing a seatbelt and driving under the blood alcohol limit remain high and self reported compliance increases during Operation Westsafe enforcement matrices.

## **7. FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

As Operation WestSafe enters its third year, there are challenges ahead involving the need to uphold the levels of enforcement and program impact, to incorporate innovation and to engage the community with greater significance.

Prolonged exposure to Operation WestSafe advertising and police activity has led Western Sydney drivers to a view that this level of enforcement is the 'norm', thus reducing the impact of seeing Westsafe as an additional deterrent.

Discussions are being held between the RTA, MAA, the NSW Police and Local Government to review the program. In 2003-04, a number of revisions are being considered, including:

- Review of the enforcement matrix to allow for a shorter but more intense period of activity. The first matrix of the 2003/04 year will be four weeks with 14 bursts of enforcement, rather than the original 3 months. There will also be an increased focus on different zones within Western Sydney to allow greater efficiency and reach when placing media.
- Refreshing the public education components of the program with new campaign graphics and messages. The newly revised materials will be piloted for the first phase of Operation WestSafe in 2004.

- Renewed emphasis on invigorating program ownership by program partners, and at the community level to ensure that the program continues to be well resourced and to have impact on Western Sydney drivers.

In conclusion, the results of Operation WestSafe to date have been very positive. Reductions in crash numbers, fatality and injury levels, increased profile of police enforcement, significant levels of traffic infringements have made the program a success. Good reach of the advertising campaign as well as strong support by all stakeholders and opinion leaders involved has ensured this success. As Operation WestSafe continues into 2003, its third year, the challenge will be to continue with this model supported by public education to effect long term road safety behavioural change.