

Desperately Seeking Safety: Community Engagement

Mercedes Iasiello

Department for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure

Email: mercedes.iasiello@saugov.sa.gov.au

Introduction

This paper focuses on the vital role of the process of community engagement, in enabling community road safety groups to participate in assisting the South Australian Government to achieve its (and the nation's) target of less than 90 fatalities and 1000 serious injuries by 2010.

“The South Australian Road Safety Action Plan 2008-2010 recognises the importance of community engagement and participation in road safety. This will involve working more closely with Community Road Safety Groups and Local Government so that we can better target road safety initiatives and programs in communities.”¹

The culture of road safety has changed significantly in South Australia and with the current emphasis on road safety being everyone's responsibility², the role of community road safety groups is more acknowledged now by the Government than ever before.

South Australia has a history of community engagement in road safety beginning in 1987 when the Road Safety Division of the Department of Road Transport (as DTEI was then known) along with the Local Government Association of the day endorsed the formation of committees each with their own constitution, membership, funding, administration, aims, functions and the like.³ This initiative was unsuccessful due to changes in government policy, and in 1999, following the acceptance of a report ‘Best Practice Review of Community Road Safety Programs’ by the government of the day, the Community Road Safety Program commenced in South Australia.⁴ This report defined ‘continuing participation of the community in road safety initiatives’⁵ as the community actively pursuing identification of their road safety needs, making decisions about how to solve them and establishing mechanisms to meet these needs using local and state resources and program evaluation. The Community Road Safety Program commenced in 1999 with a handful of groups that had already been established since the late 90's and one road safety officer. Since that time the program has grown to 37 community road safety groups and the equivalent of 3 full-time road safety officers. These volunteer groups are in the main independently incorporated committees, supported by stakeholders such as DTEI, SA Police, Emergency Services, Council, Health and Education.

Discussion

Some of the ingredients of successful community engagement are the development of trust, two way communication, collaboration and empowerment. The advantage for road safety in conducting a community engagement model is that the quality of solutions, the enthusiasm and engagement of community groups is quite high. The willingness to continue working on projects is sustained and easier to support. One of the outcomes for government is that community capacity is strengthened, trust and confidence in the government is increased. Government confidence in community input is heightened and better policies are developed to the advantage of all parties.

In desperately seeking road safety, community road safety groups are well placed to assist with an improvement in road safety in their area. They are able to identify local road safety issues, propose and implement solutions and gain funding to support their projects. They are able to introduce conversations and debate that bring about renewed awareness about road safety issues relevant to their local community. Community road safety groups

¹ Page 1 Minister Zollo's introduction of [The South Australian Road Safety Action Plan 2008-2010](#)

² Page 1 Minister Zollo's introduction of [The South Australian Road Safety Action Plan 2008-2010](#) and SAPOL's [Road Safety Strategic Plan 2010](#)

³ JR Walker, [Road Safety and the Community: Towards a working model](#) Feb 1990

⁴ [Best Practice Review of Community Road Safety Programs](#), author, Mercedes Haralam (Iasiello)

⁵ Ibid page 10

are clear about what can be done and accept realistic goals. They create inspired solutions to influence a change in thinking and behaviour on our roads.

While they are good at identification of the issues, unless they are also well informed, their creative solutions may seem bizarre and impractical from the perspective of the road authority. One example of a bizarre idea is proposing the introduction of concave mirrors at railway crossings so that cars can see down the track as they approach a railway crossing. While the group was quite passionate about this solution at first, because of the good relationship we have with the group, it was easy to strike a balance between respecting the idea and explaining its impracticality. This led the group to reject the idea once they were better informed.

Most ideas and solutions coming from the groups however are inspired. Community road safety groups have the capacity to explain the behaviour of their local community so that the appropriate engineering takes place. They need to acknowledge local road deaths and raise awareness in their community. Solutions such as the crash markers, though not initially popular with government have been adopted by our government. Other initiatives include using the cheaper alternative of raised pavement markers instead of Vibraline to help contact fatigue. These were placed on all our state highways. Groups have proposed different fatigue and other road safety messages for roadside signs and taken responsibility for swapping those signs regularly so the message is fresh. I've heard feedback from truck drivers who take note of the different messages. And there are many other examples where state policy has been influenced by a road safety group.

Working with groups is very rewarding and demanding. If you commit to this kind of program there are some key ingredients which must be included for a successful community road safety program.

- acknowledge that you are working with volunteers
- select staff with the skills to foster positive relationships with these volunteers
- give them funding that is ongoing, simple to apply for and flexible
- give them support in administrative costs
- give them support from stakeholder groups such as Police, emergency services, health, education
- provide them with guidelines and resources including web-page and printed material
- provide them with opportunities to learn from others
- ask their input into government policies and respect their opinion
- respect their collective intelligence, especially when it comes to pointing out the flaws in our government solutions to road safety
- make it easy for them to conduct their projects by giving them as much support you can
- keep them on task with a strategic plan and regular review of projects, aims and objectives
- reward them for the work they do and point out their successes (they don't always see them!)
- be honest when they get off track and support them to be successful.

Keeping the groups healthy and operational can be very challenging. There are:

- changes in leadership that can affect how well a group functions
- changes in group dynamics as new people enter the group and others leave
- frustrations of low numbers of members
- frustrations at the apathy of the community in general
- a variety of different skills that can influence the capacity of a group
- political influences to consider, both internal and external

Community road safety groups have an important role in lobbying for a safer road system. As they become more familiar with the way that state and local government operate, they are able to apply their influence to get things done. This can be useful to a road authority. For example, in the attempt to get speeds lowered in this state, support from community road safety groups is proving valuable in enabling this to happen. Often Ministers will be influenced by community opinion that supports road authority decisions.

Trying to ascertain how much the community road safety groups are contributing to the road toll – our evaluation of their role if you like – is very difficult in isolation. The very nature of their work is difficult to evaluate in empirical terms. X input does not equal Y outcome. I don't think we can ever prove how many lives they have saved. The very fact that they are a preventative measure precludes us from applying a formula of measurement that applies to community road safety. We do know that we can see the influence in a community. There are road safety signs, crash markers, stickers on petrol bowsers, signs on school gates and in the school yard, posters at the local supermarket or council chambers, signs at football grounds. There are articles,

advertisements in local papers. People debate the road toll at pubs where there are coasters, posters, stickers in the male urinals, or volunteer cars to take you home. At local events there are stalls with crashed car displays, quizzes, breathalysers, hazard perception tests, road safety handouts, videos, lemon cars, safety lessons about trucks.

All these things keep road safety in the conscious mind of the road user and help evolve a society that is willing to consider the safety of others on the road. Advertising on television and large billboards sets the scene for raising awareness of road safety, and community road safety creates the conversation and debate that keeps the message relevant and local.

In summary, community engagement, is just that ...getting the community to connect with you, so that all parties understand and respect each other and work towards a common goal...in this case, a lowered road safety toll.