Development and Implementation of the NSW Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program

Alice Ma[a], Evan Walker[a], Martin O'Reilly[a], Justin McLean[a], Louise Higgins-Whitton[a], Paul Curtis[b]

[a]NSW Centre for Road Safety, Transport for NSW; [b]NSW Roads and Maritime Services

Abstract

The NSW Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program (the Program) commenced on 1 February 2015. The Program helps repeat and serious offenders separate drinking from driving while enabling them to continue to access employment and essential services. This paper examines the road safety evidence and principles that guided the development of the Program, as well as the key policies, administrative features and support structures in place to ensure the Program operates as intended. The paper also explores key lessons learnt, including the importance of properly estimating costs and time for developing support systems and processes, and the need to monitor policy impact.

Background

When the Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program was introduced, alcohol was a factor in around 20 per cent of fatalities in NSW. Nearly one in five drink-drive offenders were being convicted of a high-range first offence, and nearly one in six drink-drive offenders were being convicted of a subsequent drink-driving offence within five years. International evidence indicated that repeat drink drivers were more likely to be involved in a fatal drink-driving crash than other drivers (Hedlund & Fell, 1995).

NSW had a voluntary interlock program since 2003, however less than 5 per cent of eligible offenders entered the program annually. This limited program benefits in reducing re-offending and thereby improving road safety. Based on experience in other jurisdictions with a mandatory program (including Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and South Australia), it was estimated that a mandatory program in NSW could reduce the re-offending rate of high-risk drink drivers from one in six to one in 12, equating to a reduction of around 500 offences per year.

Key policy considerations

The Program targets the highest risk drink-driver offenders – those who commit high-range offences and those who commit two or more drink-driving offences in five years. It is intended to be rehabilitative as well as punitive, drawing on best practice and evidence that a short time between when the offender commits the offence starts the learning process to separate drinking from driving is of greatest benefit.

Policy considerations to ensure the Program is effective, fair and focused on rehabilitation included:

- Striking the balance between judicial and administrative program features

- Developing features to encourage offenders to participate in the Program, including those in severe financial hardship

- Developing appropriate exemptions for offenders unable to participate due to a medical condition or not having access to a vehicle

- Developing performance monitoring features to address drink-driving behaviour and apply appropriate interventions

- Developing an appropriate market-driven approach to interlock service provision

- Developing partnerships across the Transport, Justice, Health and Community Services sectors to deliver operational solutions.

Implementation approach

The governance model for implementation comprises an inter-agency Steering Committee supported by a project team of subject matter experts, with ongoing consultation with partner agencies and organisations.

Key items progressed included:

- Participant database to enable performance management (including interface with Driver Licence Management System and provider database systems)

- Business rules and processes for program administration (including changes to licensing management systems)

- New provider accreditation and management framework including new Provider Agreements and technical and functional specifications for interlock devices

- Severe Financial Hardship scheme funded by NSW Government

- Communication materials to educate participants and the community.

Key learnings

Licensing data from Roads and Maritime Services show that, as at April 2016, over 4,000 mandatory interlock orders had been made by court and over 1,200 interlock licenses had been issued.

Key learnings from the implementation process include the importance of properly estimating costs and time involved in developing support systems and processes, and the need to monitor policy impact to respond to unintended consequences.

Phase One of the program evaluation entails a process evaluation and assessment of initial outcomes and is expected to be completed by July 2017. This evaluation will consider data collected from a survey of Program participants, survey and interview with exempted offenders, interviews with interlock service providers, and program and licensing data collected by Roads and Maritime Services.

References

Hedlund, J and Fell, J. (1995). Repeat offenders and persistent drinking drivers in the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Report NTS-20, Washington.