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Need for Active Alcohol Public Education Program. March 1, 1978.
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Report to Joan Claybrook, Administrator, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; by Hugh J. Wessinger, Associate Director, Community and Economic Development Div.

Contact: Community and Economic Development Div.
Organization Concerned: Department of Transportation.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA's) public education program for the past several years has been directed at combating the drinking-driver problem. A major portion of the funds obligated for the program were used for contracts with advertising firms for the development of television and radio announcements and other printed material for media placement. In early 1977, as a cost-saving measure, the Department of Transportation cancelled these contracts and proposed that this work could be done in-house. As of January 1978, no work has been done to develop materials for the media. Several State highway safety representatives noted that a serious information void currently exists, and some States' attempts to obtain public education information from other States have not been successful. Although an independent evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the public information program has not been made, some studies have shown that the NHTSA public education campaign has been effective. The public should continually receive the message that the drinking-driver problem is a serious national problem and that everyone has a personal responsibility to help reduce the number of accidents caused by alcohol. The Federal Government should take the initiative in the development of public education material. (RRS)



UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

MAR 1 1978

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

Ms. Joan Claybrook
Administrator, National Highway
Traffic Safety Administration
Department of Transportation

Dear Ms. Claybrook:

We are examining certain aspects of Federal/State efforts to help reduce the Nation's drinking-driver problem. Our work included a review of highway safety programs in Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin, and included contacts with State and local traffic safety and law enforcement officials. Although our work is not yet complete, we want to bring to your attention the apparent need to establish a federally sponsored public education program.

As you know, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) public education program for the past several years has been directed at combating the drinking-driver problem. Funds obligated for the program during the past 3 years were: \$486,000 in fiscal year 1975; \$727,000 in fiscal year 1976; and \$246,000 in fiscal year 1977. A major portion of these funds were used for contracts with advertising firms for the development of television and radio announcements and other printed material for media placement. This data was then distributed to national radio and television networks, to television and radio stations in major metropolitan areas, and to magazine and newspaper publishers. NHTSA also contracted with an advertising firm for the operation of a Coordination Center for Mass Communication and Highway Safety to provide mass communication advice and provide for the exchange of information among national organizations, as well as assist State and local personnel in various public education campaigns.

In early 1977, the Department of Transportation canceled these contracts as a cost-saving measure and proposed that this work could be done in-house in

- the future. As of January 1978, no work has been done to develop the materials for the media previously supplied by contract. Several State highway safety representatives have advised us that a serious information void currently exists. They stated that, in some cases, they could develop the public education material themselves, but central development by the Federal Government would help avoid duplication of effort, would serve to reduce overall costs, and would result in a more suitable product. State and local traffic safety officials told us that the educational material that was centrally produced was very useful. For example, according to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, 37 radio stations serving Minnesota aired NHTSA-developed spot announcements about 2,000 times during a 1-month period.

We also learned that some States' attempts to obtain public education information from other States have not been successful. One State we visited attempted to obtain information for television announcements produced by another State--allegedly with Federal funds. The requesting State, however, was told it would have to pay \$5,000 for the material. We understand that this matter is currently under litigation.

We have not made an independent evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the public information program; however, studies have shown that the NHTSA public education campaign has been effective. Southwest Research Institute in its evaluation of alcohol safety action projects concluded that localities which had public education campaigns showed an increased public awareness of the drinking-driver problem. Also, the contractor who developed the public education material performed a "before and after" random nationwide survey of households and concluded that the public's concern and awareness of the drinking-driver problem increased significantly during the public education campaign.

We believe that the public should continually receive the message that the drinking-driver problem is a serious national problem and everyone has a personal responsibility to help reduce the number of accidents caused by alcohol. As you are aware, it has been reported that alcohol is involved in 50 percent of all fatal crashes. This is about 23,000 highway deaths each year. Furthermore, we believe that the Federal Government should take the initiative in the development of public education material. The need for an active Federal public education program will become more critical in the future because the educational material previously produced will become outdated and most likely lose its effectiveness. To help insure that the public receives the necessary information and to reduce duplication of effort by individual State and local governments in preparing public education materials, we recommend that NHTSA promptly establish an active public education program.

If you desire additional information or wish to discuss this subject further, we will be pleased to meet with you or members of your staff. We appreciate the courtesies extended to us by your staff and we would like to be advised, within 30 days of the date of this letter, of any action you have taken or plan to take in the near future on this matter.

Copies of this letter are also being sent to the Secretary of Transportation and the Director of the Office of Public and Consumer Affairs, Department of Transportation.

Sincerely yours,



Hugh W. Wessinger
Associate Director