



Characteristics of State Law Enforcement Liaison Programs

The Law Enforcement Liaison (LEL) program began in 1990 as part of the national 70 x '92 seat belt campaign. In conjunction with the campaign, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration provided funding to States to hire law enforcement officers to recruit law enforcement agencies (LEAs) to participate in seat belt enforcement programs. Today, NHTSA distributes millions of dollars each year to the States for a variety of traffic safety programs and initiatives. Within the States, LELs support these efforts through their interactions with LEAs.

State LEL programs vary to allow States to determine their individual needs and to tailor their approaches to best fit their LEAs and enforcement contexts. The *Characteristics of State Law Enforcement Liaison Programs* project aimed to improve understanding of State LEL programs across the United States. It included an online survey of LELs from State programs and another of State Highway Safety Office (SHSO) representatives to identify program characteristics and practices. The research was conducted under the National Cooperative Research and Evaluation Program (NCREP), which was established in the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act. NCREP is a cooperative program between NHTSA and the Governors Highway Safety Association to research and evaluate State highway safety countermeasures and highway safety topics identified by State agencies as important to their programs.

After approval from the Office on Management and Budget (Control No. 2127-0739), data were collected from LELs from December 2019 to March 2020. Data were collected from SHSOs from January 2020 to April 2020 and then again in September 2020 due to the low response during a public health emergency. The SHSO representatives were supervisors or the main SHSO contacts for that States' LELs. There were 179 State LELs identified and contacted, and 105 LELs from 40 States completed

the survey (59%). There were 59 SHSO representatives contacted, and 31 (53%) completed the survey.

The survey questions captured a variety of LEL program characteristics such as administrative and supervisory structures, network reach, communication between grant administrators and grantees, levels of accountability, grant topics, traffic safety outcomes, mobilization of enforcement agencies, and levels of funding and accountability for grantees. This Traffic Tech highlights a few key characteristics of State LELs.

State LEL Personnel

Almost all LELs (97%) had a background in law enforcement. About half (55%) of the LELs were active law enforcement officers immediately before becoming LELs, but most of the others (39%) were retired law enforcement at the time. Most of the LELs with law enforcement experience had ranking positions. While over half of the LELs reported that they were full-time, 46% reported being part-time LELs. Most LELs worked in a specific region of their State (54%), but just under a quarter covered the entire State (23%).

Training completed by more than half of the LELs included Standardized Field Sobriety Testing (78%), Law Enforcement Liaison Professional Development (72%), Instructor Development (60%), Advanced Roadside Impaired Driving Enforcement (combined on-line and in classroom, 59%), and Data Driven Approaches to Highway Safety Planning (58%). A substantial number of LELs also provided trainings to LEAs, including Standardized Field Sobriety Testing (18), Below 100 (11), and Drug Recognition Experts (10).

State LEL Responsibilities

In support of their programs, most LELs (over 80%) recruited grantees (both face-to-face and electronically), provided information and professional training to LEAs,

served as the point of contact between the SHSO and law enforcement community, and established relationships with LEAs, advocates, and stakeholders.

There are many traffic safety topics on which LELs could direct their time, and Table 1 below shows how many LELs reported focusing on each topic. Over three-quarters of LELs indicated responsibilities in the areas of impaired driving, occupant protection, distracted driving, and speed management. The SHSOs reported similar percentages.

Table 1. Traffic Safety Focus Areas for LELs

Program Area (n = 105)	% LELs
Impaired Driving	86%
Occupant Protection	82%
Distracted Driving	82%
Speed Management	77%
Traffic Safety Related Training	65%
Unsafe (Aggressive) Driving	63%
General Traffic Enforcement	62%
Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety	58%
Motorcyclist Safety	54%
Teen Drivers	54%
Officer Safety	49%
Pupil Transportation Safety	34%
Improvement of Traffic Records	23%
Enhancement of Emergency Services	16%

Characteristics of Success and Evaluation

LELs provided importance ratings of various characteristics for meeting their responsibilities on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 for “Not Important at All” to 5 for “Absolutely Essential.” Six characteristics tied for first place with an average rating of 4.5 (between “Very Important” and “Absolutely Essential”):

- Demonstrated knowledge, understanding, and application of State traffic safety laws
- Strong interpersonal skills
- Good oral communications skills
- Knowledge of general police methods, practices, and procedures
- Connections with LEAs in jurisdiction
- Graduation from an accredited law enforcement agency

SHSOs generally agreed with the LELs. SHSOs rated the first three characteristics in the LEL list in a first-place tie with an average of 4.7. SHSOs rated the fourth and fifth characteristics in the LEL list, along with “traffic law enforcement experience,” in a second-place tie with an average of 4.5.

Among the 104 responding LELs, 72% indicated they knew how their work performance was evaluated. LELs indicated metrics used by their supervisors. The four selected by more than half of the LELs included number of LEAs contacted in-person (78%), attendance at local highway safety events and regional conferences (69%), the number of LEAs contacted remotely (63%), and the number of LEAs participating in mobilizations (60%). Only 37% of LELs reported being evaluated on the number of highway safety grantees. The SHSOs provided the same top four responses.

LEA Participation

An important LEL program characteristic is its success in encouraging LEAs to participate in NHTSA-sponsored traffic safety programs. LELs were asked to rate the effectiveness of various means of communication with prospective grantees on a 5-point scale from 1 for “Not effective at all” to 5 for “Extremely Effective.” The three highest rated methods of communication were in-person (face-to-face) meetings (4.5), law enforcement organizational meetings (4.4), and conversations and presentations at local conferences and events (4.3).

The survey also included a question that could be used as an outcome measure to analyze LEL success in encouraging LEAs to participate in NHTSA-sponsored programs. Each LEL reported the number of LEAs in their area of responsibility, and of those, the number that participated in NHTSA’s highway safety programs in 2018. The analyst calculated the participation rates and binned the percentages into quartiles. The 86 LELs with valid responses provided participation rates across all four quartiles. In fact, 20% of the LELs reported the lowest quartile of participation (0% to 25%), and 31% reported the highest quartile (76% to 100%). However, analyses of the variation using rates of LEA participation and several LEL program characteristics did not uncover any patterns.

LELs identified reasons that LEAs and law enforcement leaders provided for not participating in funded traffic safety programs. The most frequent responses were insufficient staffing (90%), lack of interest by chiefs and sheriffs (75%), and competing overtime opportunities (67%). The SHSOs’ most frequent responses were

insufficient staffing (97%), competing priorities (81%), and lack of interest by chiefs and sheriffs (74%).

Discussion

LELs are primarily former law enforcement officers who work with SHSOs and other traffic safety organizations to engage LEAs in their States to participate in NHTSA traffic safety programs. They provide information to LEAs on the importance of traffic safety, and they support LEAs' efforts to improve traffic safety in their communities. One potential area for improvement is in the relative low rating of traffic records improvements as a focus area given its importance for quality crash and other traffic safety data.

The large variation in the percentage of LEAs participating in traffic safety programs and the reasons LELs and SHSOs provided for why LEAs do not participate suggest opportunities for additional gains. While insufficient LEA staffing may be a difficult issue to address, increasing interest in and perceived importance of traffic safety in the law enforcement community were recognized as important responsibilities of LELs. These issues suggest a new approach to traffic safety enforcement may be needed.

Several LEL respondents offered that they present data showing the effectiveness of mobilizations and success stories from other jurisdictions as strategies for overcoming barriers to participation. NHTSA used such an approach to share ideas in the NHTSA report, *High-Visibility Enforcement: Assessing Change and Identifying Opportunities* (Byrne et al., 2021). At the same time, LELs may be facing additional challenges because of the public health emergency. Many LELs indicated that in-person contacts with LEAs were an effective method of recruitment, but current and future environments may favor remote communications.

References:

- Byrne, A., Petrella, M., & Masucci, C. (2021, May). *High-visibility enforcement: Assessing change and identifying opportunities* (Report No. DOT HS 813 066). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. <https://rosap.nhtl.bts.gov/view/dot/55935>
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