

Tougher alcohol limits for drivers gains support

BYLINE: CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND
DATE: 04-03-2000
PUBLICATION: Providence Journal Company
EDITION: All
SECTION: NEWS
PAGE: A-08

* The mother of a drunken-driving victim says she met with Rep. Donald J. Lally on Saturday and he assured her that he would back the more stringent blood-alcohol limit.

Meg DeCubellis was disappointed that her town's state representative, Donald J. Lally Jr., D-Narragansett, missed her dramatic testimony on drunken-driving legislation before the General Assembly last month.

So on Saturday morning, DeCubellis - whose 13-year-old daughter was killed in an accident caused by a drunken driver five months ago drove the short distance from her home to Lally's, one neighborhood over.

Without any appointment, DeCubellis knocked on Lally's door.

She is glad she made the trip.

A key member of the House Judiciary Committee, Lally had previously opposed legislation to lower the legal drunken-driving limit to .08 blood-alcohol concentration. But after meeting with DeCubellis in his living room for a few minutes, as Lally's own children ran in and out of the house, DeCubellis said, Lally told her he would change his position and support the measure this year.

Lally also mentioned the scores of telephone calls he has received in recent days from .08 advocates.

"Boy, you must know a lot of people in the state," DeCubellis said Lally told her.

Lally did not return telephone calls from The Journal yesterday to confirm DeCubellis's account. But if it is accurate, Lally's conversion is the fruit of an especially emotional and determined public relations blitz this year by .08 proponents. The \$355,000 effort is sponsored by Governor Almond's administration, Amica insurance and AAA.

In each of the last several years, advocates have cranked up the pressure in a losing battle that has been waged over mind-numbing arguments about body weights, number of drinks consumed and full stomachs versus empty stomachs.

What gives this year's .08 campaign its impact is the unprecedented and sustained cooperation of a half-dozen parents of young drunken-driving victims like Meg DeCubellis and her husband, John.

These are people who are still grieving. Most of them are unaccustomed to lobbying.

"As I walked up [to Lally's house], I think he thought, 'Wow, this woman actually came to my house,'" said Meg DeCubellis. But she said she was unafraid of rejection.

"You can't do anything to hurt me at this point. I've been through the worst thing that hopefully will ever happen to me in my life. If I didn't do this, I would be ashamed of myself.

"John and I both feel like we have to do this. We have to get out there and we have to do this."

This week, the pressure will be especially intense on members of the House Judiciary Committee.

The 19-member committee, which has narrowly killed .08 blood-alcohol limit bills in the past, faces a deadline for legislative action this week. If advocates of the .08 bill can sway a few representatives and make sure all 19 members of the committee show up for a vote which could take place on Thursday the measure would go to the House floor, where it has a good chance of passage.

A scramble is on to count votes, and lobbyists for both sides say it is extremely close.

There are other events this week that will bring focus on the House's handling of the measure. The Senate Judiciary Committee is expected to approve a .08 measure tonight.

Then tomorrow, a sentencing hearing is scheduled in Kent County Superior Court for Stephen Reise, of Jamestown, the driver who crashed into the car carrying Katie DeCubellis and another victim, 44-year-old Marsha Bowman, who was driving. Meg and John DeCubellis plan to read statements at Reise's sentencing.

The consortium last night planned to air commercials featuring a direct appeal from DeCubellis and other parents of drunken-driving victims on at least two Rhode Island television stations. The spot was unveiled yesterday at a news conference at Amica's headquarters in Lincoln:

"Katie was only 13 years old, and now she's gone forever. Are the lobbyists for bars and restaurants more important than our children?" DeCubellis says in the commercial.

"Please call 222-2466. Ask the House leadership how many more of Rhode Island's children must die before they get serious about drunk drivers," another parent, Richard Morsilli, tells viewers.

In addition to the television campaign, the whole state especially the districts of key House Judiciary Committee members are being lobbied by banks of telephone callers, direct mail, billboards featuring images of the victims and radio commercials with pleas by their grieving parents.

Meg and John DeCubellis handed out fliers at the post-Mass coffee social at Christ the King Church in South Kingstown. Many of the church's communicants are Lally's constituents.

There's more. Amica has been buying full-page newspaper advertisements in The Journal with photographs of all House Judiciary members and their telephone numbers.

Lost in this overall message, though, is the fact that none of the recent drunken-driving deaths in Rhode Island, including the deaths of young people featured in the present campaign, were caused by people whose blood-alcohol level was between .08 and .10, the current limit.

The Rhode Island Hospitality and Tourism Association and lobbyists for the state's liquor, wine and beer distributors have pointed out many times over that drunken drivers who kill typically have blood-alcohol levels exceeding .10. Those lobbyists did not return telephone calls yesterday.

But they have argued that reducing the level to .08 will only penalize "social drinkers" and people who are not impaired when they get behind the wheel.

In the past decade, those arguments have found a receptive audience in the House, and, even with Lally's reported switch, it remains unclear whether the tide will turn.

The advocates for reducing the blood-alcohol limit to .08 say that action will increase overall awareness and get people who shouldn't be driving off the roads. That's the message parents of victims say they plan to bring to the State House.

And, in some cases, to the private homes of individual state representatives.

"It's our feeling that for years, we've gone up there with experts from Washington, from around the state, from around New England," said Ed Walsh, executive director of the Governor's Office on Highway Safety.

"The idea of hitting an emotional chord with the victims sounded like a winner, and graciously, these parents have accepted the challenge and contributed unbelievably.

"I just can't imagine losing my child and doing what they are doing."

KEYWORDS: ALCOHOLIC; BEVERAGES; LEGISLATION