

DAILY TIMES

Eckman family, pols call for DUI law changes after fatal crash

Alex Rose May 14, 2019 Comments



ASTON — The DUI-related death of 45-year-old Deana Eckman in February prompted the Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee to hold a hearing Monday at Neumann University seeking input on new laws that might help avert similar tragedies in the future.

“On Feb. 16, something that is unimaginable to most people happened – Deana and (her husband) Chris Eckman were struck in a violent crash by a drunk driver while on their way home from a family event,” said

state Sen. Tom Killion, R-9 of Middletown, a member of the committee.

The crash occurred about 9:30 p.m. on Route 452 in Upper Chichester when a Ram 2500 pickup truck allegedly being operated by David Strowhouer, 30, of Newtown Square, crossed a double yellow line and slammed head-on into the 2019 Subaru WRX Chris and Deana Eckman were driving.

Authorities allege Strowhouer's blood-alcohol level was 0.199 and he had traces of cocaine, diazepam and marijuana in his system. Online court records indicate Strowhouer had five prior DUIs on his record since 2010 and was on probation for a previous offense at the time of the crash. "

Since the accident, everyone has been asking the same questions," said Killion. "How could this happen? How could someone who had already had five DUIs once again get behind the wheel while intoxicated and end someone's life, and what can we do to prevent this from happening again?"

Deana's parents, Richard and Roseanne DeRosa, offered partial answers.

Richard noted that in many DUI arrests, offenders initially charged with the highest rate of alcohol will plead and be sentenced at the lowest rate. The minimum sentences for repeated offenses also remain at just one year, he said, and many times allow for early release on "good-time" credit.

In Strowhouer's case, he pleaded guilty to his fourth and fifth DUIs at the same time in Chester County Oct. 2, 2017, and was given a total sentence of 18 to 36 months in state prison. Later that same month, he pleaded to a fifth DUI before Delaware County Common Pleas Court Judge Mary Alice Brennan for DUI: controlled substance – combination alcohol/drug as a third offense.

"Unfortunately, a Delaware County judge ran David Strowhouer's sentence concurrent instead of consecutive and the D.A. agreed to it," said Roseanne DeRosa. That allowed Strowhouer to be back on the streets just a little more than a year later.

"David Strowhouer destroyed our family and the criminal justice system failed us miserably," Roseanne DeRosa said. "Our DUI laws must change. Deana wasn't the first to lose her life and, unfortunately, she won't be the last."

Richard DeRosa said he believes real change can only come from engineers working to prevent tragedies with technology, such as the Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety – or DADSS – that immobilizes a vehicle when it detects the driver is over the legal limit of 0.08 percent BAC.

He suggested Pennsylvania lead the way in requiring every new vehicle in the state to be outfitted with a DADSS system beginning in 2025, while Mothers Against Drunk Driving representative Debbie D'Addona suggested implementing the SCRAM continuous alcohol monitoring bracelet, which can instantly notify law enforcement when those on parole and probation imbibe.

Chris Demko, of Pennsylvania Parents Against Impaired Driving, said at least two counties in the state already employ SCRAM bracelets, an idea Killion and Delaware County District Attorney Katayoun Copeland said they would explore further.

Killion noted Strowhouer had a history of failing to comply with probation and parole requirements. A tool like the SCRAM bracelet would allow such offenders to be immediately picked up and brought back into the system, he said.

Demko and D'Addona also offered a slew of depressing statistics on DUIs. Demko said 300 people are killed every year in the state by drunk drivers, and about 40 percent of those involve repeat offenders.

D'Addona said that DUI drivers on average have been over the limit 80 or more times before their first arrest, and about one third of those arrested each year are repeat offenders.

Killion said one takeaway from the hearing was a desire to focus more on repeat offenders with high blood alcohol contents, but also to change the public perception of an initial DUI from something that is not a big deal to a wake-up call.

"When we hear the line of, 'It was just a DUI,' we've got to speak up and we have to say 'No,' because a year from now it will be a fourth or a fifth," said Pennsylvania District Attorneys Association Director of Legislation and Policy Greg Rowe. "To convince people, to convince lawmakers, to convince policy makers, to convince the general public, I think that has to become part of our parlance."

"DUIs are not harmless crimes," Copeland said. "Every DUI driver, when they get behind the wheel of a car, they are potentially a homicide waiting to happen."

Copeland noted the committee has taken steps in recent years to push for harsher penalties, including the new homicide by vehicle while DUI law that carries a mandatory minimum seven-year prison sentence. Strowhouer is the first person in Delaware County to be charged under that law.

Copeland suggested enacting even more laws in the current session, including increasing minimum penalties to two or more years for repeat third-tier offenders, removing the ability for early release for repeat offenders and increasing offense gravity scores for sentencing guidelines.

Other topics Monday included increased education for probation and parole officers, better oversight and accountability for treatment programs, and implementing DUI courts similar to mental health or drug courts already operating in many jurisdictions.

The full hearing can be viewed online at pasenategop.com/blog/051319-2.