

## CRACKING THE CODE FOR DEVELOPING TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE

Park Rapids, a rural community (pop. 3,000) in north central Minnesota, conducted a 3-year traffic safety culture (TSC) pilot project (2017-2019) as the latest effort to change people's behavior in a sustained way.

*The goal of this project was to increase health and safety by understanding how culture impacts traffic safety behavior in a community while creating common language, common understanding and a portfolio of strategies to positively impact traffic safety culture. As a pilot project, the goal was to create the foundation for applying traffic safety culture in a community, to plan efforts and to mobilize collaborative partnerships. (Kari Finley, 2020).*

Like most transportation departments and highway safety offices around the country, Minnesota measures traffic safety performance in outcomes such as the number of annual traffic fatalities. In 2013, the Department of Transportation (MnDOT), Department of Public Safety, and other stakeholders in the Toward Zero Deaths (TZD) program began to focus on TSC as a way to promote positive traffic safety behaviors.

From 2013-2015, Minnesota conducted a statewide baseline survey to measure Minnesota road users' TSC and to develop a prediction model for predictors of traffic safety behaviors. They identified culture-based strategies to achieve safety targets and assessed the potential for success of those strategies among Minnesota communities.

Data showed that the Park Rapids community was over-represented in crashes compared to Minnesota cities of the same size<sup>1</sup>. With strong community support for improvement, Park Rapids was selected as the site of a TSC pilot program.

The TSC pilot project would align traffic safety efforts across the Park Rapids community. The project was funded by HSIP (Highway Safety Improvement Program) dollars. MnDOT followed a TSC development process that included these basic steps:

- Convene a community traffic safety coalition.
- Engaging stakeholders and establishing partnerships.
- Develop a community Traffic Safety Culture Implementation Plan.



*The following process for developing safety culture summarizes a Safety Culture Workshop held jointly by the NCHRP 17-69 panel and AASHTO in October 2018.*

One of the foundational elements of the Park Rapids TSC project was a community traffic safety culture coalition.

*Stakeholder engagement is critical to the success of traffic safety culture efforts. Stakeholders need to have a clear understanding of why they are coming to a coalition/workgroup meeting. They need to see and understand how they can contribute to the project's efforts. Time spent to align the group's focus and goals is an important part of the planning process and can improve sustainability in traffic safety culture efforts. (Kari Finley, 2020)*

Establishing the coalition meant creating a team of passionate community leaders who, together, would champion local traffic safety.

Another key element of the Park Rapids pilot project was finding a way to connect traffic safety culture across the social ecology. This meant the community was working together across multiple levels to promote TSC strategies and reiterate traffic safety messages:

- Families created and talked about their own traffic safety rules.
- Schools promoted traffic safety in health and driver's education classes.
- Workplaces established traffic safety policies and provided training (such as NETS--Network of Employers for Traffic Safety and the local chamber of commerce).
- Hospitals and healthcare providers talked to patients about wearing seat belts and about not driving while impaired (i.e., medicated).
- Local government officials considered policies to reduce risky driving behavior.



But community integration didn't end there. For example, Cub Scouts working on traffic safety merit badges would work with TZD partners to promote traffic safety.

Driving while impaired was an issue that Park Rapids wanted to tackle. The small, rural community lacked ride share and cab services. The community created the Joyride Program to help intoxicated patrons of bars and restaurants get home safely. Volunteers, insurance companies, bars, restaurants and local bus companies offered free or discounted rides for intoxicated patrons.



The final evaluation is completed, and will be published soon. In the meantime, MnDOT recommends the following as success factors for any TZD program:

- Commitment to change TSC
- Collaboration between traffic safety advocates
- Promote best practices and lessons learned
- Innovation

In the words of Kristine Hernandez, Statewide TZD Program Coordinator, "Zero is attainable, but it will take all of us working together to get there!"



<sup>1</sup> Two-thirds more people were seriously injured in Park Rapids crashes than other Minnesota cities of the same size (2012-2016) (Source: <https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ots/reports-statistics/pages/crash-facts.aspx>).

For more information, contact:

**Katie Fleming-Vogl**  
Minnesota Dept. of Transportation,  
Implementation Manager

✉ [katie.fleming@state.mn.us](mailto:katie.fleming@state.mn.us)  
☎ 651-366-3772