Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Media Contact: Nedra Darling, OPA-IA Phone: 202-219-4152
For Immediate Release: November 18, 2009
Print PDF

Washington, D.C. – Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk today announced the launch of a new effort by the Indian Affairs Indian Highway Safety Program and the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Justice Services to help tribes keep drunk drivers off of their roads and highways. The IHSP and BIA-OJS have acquired four BAT (Breath Alcohol Testing) Mobiles for tribal use to effectively enforce traffic laws and ordinances and to reduce injuries and fatalities due to driving under the influence. Purchase of the vehicles was made possible by funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's National Highway Traffic Safety Program (NHTSP).

"I am extremely proud and pleased that our Indian Highway Safety Program and Office of Justice Services have undertaken this important effort to help tribes protect Indian Country's residents and visitors," Echo Hawk said. "I am very grateful to the Department of Transportation and the National Highway Traffic Safety Program for their support of our efforts to reduce injuries and save lives, especially during the upcoming holiday season."

Two of the four new BAT mobiles were delivered to the OJS District 5 in Billings, Mont., on November 4 and one was delivered to the OJS District 4 in Albuquerque, N.M., on November 9. The last BAT mobile was delivered to the OJS District 2 in Muscogee, Okla., on November 17. The districts will use the vehicles to serve 77 federally recognized tribes, with a combined population of 581,756, in seven states.

The 40-foot long mobile units, which cost approximately $300,000 apiece, use state-of-the art lighting, camera and communications systems. Each has an Intoxilyzer 8000 to precisely measure breath alcohol levels, a containment cell to transport suspects and an interior camera to produce court-quality videos of the testing process. Each unit also is decorated on the outside with colors and design elements that reflect American Indian culture, with police identification on the back and sides, and has space on the back for a user-tribe's seal. The units were manufactured by Farber Specialty Vehicles of Ohio.

According to the NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis, in the five-year period from 2002 to 2006, 3,262 Native Americans lost their lives in motor vehicle traffic crashes. Of those, 1,864 (or 57 percent) involved an alcohol-impaired driver or motorcycle operator who was at or above the legal limit of .08.

However, impaired driving is one of the deadliest problems not just in Indian Country, but in America. The NHTSA estimates that in 2007 there were approximately 13,000 total fatalities in crashes involving a driver or motorcycle rider with a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .08 or higher. And the Federal Bureau of Investigation estimates that there were about 1.5 million DWI (driving while impaired) arrests in 2007 – an average of 167 arrests per hour.

The BAT mobiles also will be used by tribal law enforcement during the upcoming Don't Shatter the Dream impaired-driving mobilization effort, which will run throughout Indian Country from December 21, 2009, through January 3, 2010.

The BIA Office of Justice Services is responsible for managing the Bureau's law enforcement, detention facilities and tribal courts programs, either directly in tribal communities or by funding tribally administered programs through contract and grants.

The Indian Highway Safety Program, a part of the Indian Affairs Office of Facilities, Environmental and Cultural Resources Division of Safety and Risk Management, is charged with meeting the traffic safety needs of the 564 federally recognized tribes. One of its goals is to decrease alcohol-related motor vehicle crash injuries and fatalities in Indian Country.

NHTSA's mission is to save lives, prevent injuries and reduce economic costs due to road traffic crashes, through education, research, safety standards and enforcement activity. For more information, visit www.nhtsa.gov.