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By ROBERT PIERCE

- Daily Leader

Its services include victim impact panels, court advocacy, counseling referrals and court monitoring, and with support from the Kansas Department of Transportation, the DUI Victim Center of Kansas has been challenged to expand its services statewide.

For more than 20 years, the agency, a certified non-profit, has advocated on behalf of the victims of DUI crashes and increased awareness of the traumatic consequences of drunk and impaired driving.

Statewide panel coordinator Paul Sidebottom was in Liberal Tuesday to talk to the Seward County Commission about bringing the agency's services. He began by explaining the victim center's history.

"We were started in 1987, based in Wichita, based on an incidence of drunk driving where a young mother who was pregnant was hit in downtown Wichita and she and her child were killed," he said. "It has been ever since that we have been working to reduce the effects of drunk driving."

Sidebottom called the victim center a full-service agency.

"It's two-fold," he said. "We want to serve the victims of DUI crashes by providing them counseling, by providing them a voice in which to speak, by providing things like compensation and guides through the court system."

Sidebottom said victims of DUI crashes don't have the same advocates as defendants in such cases.

"Our agency will provide victims of DUI crashes an advocate to guide them through the system, guide them through the unknown procedure that most law abiding citizens have no idea," he said. "It's our victim advocates who will go into the court room and stand with the victims and guide them through that process."

The DUI Victim Center also has a prevention and awareness division, and with part of that, the agency facilitates victim impact panels.

"What happens there is we are invited by a judicial district, by the prosecutors, by the judges, to start this program in which for diversions and probations, DUI offenders are ordered to come to a victim impact panel," Sidebottom said. "Offenders are confronted with the stories and the consequences of a DUI crash victim."

He said in this way, crimes are humanized in such a way that offenders can put themselves in the victims' shoes to see the flip side of DUI.

"He can see what a victim's gone through," Sidebottom said. "Offenders are regularly ordered to come to a victim impact panel where they hear two or three victims speak about their crash and speak about the consequences and the change of life they've gone through."

The agency likewise has a court watch program in which its staff, volunteers and interns come to the court system to observe DUI cases. This is just some of what the agency does for victims.

"We have our awareness programs where we hold candlelight vigils for DUI victims," Sidebottom said. "We will also do a holiday drive for victims in which red ribbons are placed on patrol vehicles and other emergency vehicles to drive through the holidays for victims of one community or another."

Sidebottom said the victim center also sponsors a fourth grade poster billboard contest in schools.

"We invite the students to come up with a poster which addresses the issue of driving under the influence, whether that's drugs or alcohol," he said. "The winner of that poster billboard contest has their poster made into a billboard in their community."

More recently, Sidebottom's agency has begun rewarding community service awards to law enforcement and community leaders for work in the area of preventing DUI crashes.

He said he would like to encourage the commission to talk with area judges and prosecutors to invite agency officials to make similar, but longer, presentations to them and probation officers to find a way to serve the community.

The DUI Victim Center currently serves eight judicial districts, most recently partnering with Dodge City.

"We are funded by the Kansas Department of Transportation," Sidebottom said. "We also have funding through the ordering of offenders to these victim impact panels. They do pay a fee to attend the class approximately an hour and a half. It's through those two sources of income that we're able to provide these services."

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