



Perceptions of the DRE Program in Washington State



Report Prepared by Mary Dhondt *¹ and Dale Willits *²



Study Goal

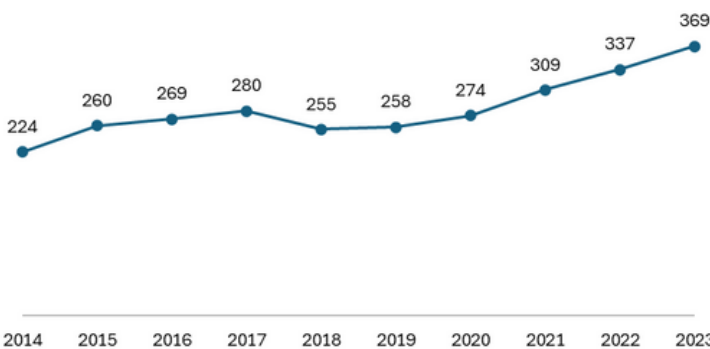
Documenting and exploring the perceptions of Drug Recognition Experts (DREs) across Washington State, the ways in which they are utilized, and the challenges they experience in their role.

The number of impaired drivers involved in fatal crashes has increased by 43% since 2019. Among these impaired drivers, 45% tested positive for poly-drug use.³

The DRE program aims to address the complex challenges of recognizing symptoms caused by the influence of drugs other than alcohol.

Despite the program's importance and significance, there has been minimal research on DRE officer's experiences, utilization, and the challenges they encounter.

Impaired Drivers in Fatal Crashes by Year in Washington State³



Methodology

Stage One

21 semi-structured interviews with current and former DREs.

Stage Two

Online survey completed by 52 current DREs including both close-ended and open-ended questions based on themes identified from interview data.

Main Research Goal:

Identifying the perceptions of DREs across Washington State regarding their role and experience in the DRE program.

Access the full report here:



<http://bit.ly/WADRE>

Interview Results

Finding #1:

How DRE Officers are Utilized



- DRE callouts and evaluations have dropped.
- Role as DRE is more “auxiliary” in comparison to other duties.
- Low levels of involvement in adjudication process.

“It’s an honor to me to be in this position, [and] to be able to go out in the middle of the night and help some young officer who’s like ‘Oh my gosh, I’ve got this mess of a wreck, and what do I do?’ I feel privileged to, be the one that they call. – Sergeant

“It’s easier [for non-DREs] to just get the warrant and go get blood... it [calling a DRE out] doesn’t cost the officer anything, other than they have to sit there a little while longer, because they have to wait for us to show up, and then an hour for the eval... And I think a lot of officers would rather go get another drunk if they can, versus actually waiting for an eval and using it. So, it’s frustrating, because it’s a whole mentality thing.” – Officer

Finding #2:

Challenges faced by DRE Officers

Many DREs believe that:

- Non-DREs prefer to skip a DRE callout and go straight to the blood warrant process.
- They have potential to provide value in the courtroom but are underutilized.
- Some DREs reported that the text-based callout system is not utilized properly and/or has technical issues.



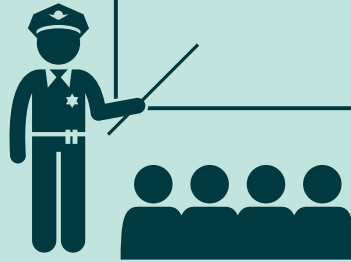
Finding #3:

Indirect Benefits Provided By DRE Officers

DREs offer many indirect benefits, such as:

- Writing quality reports.
- Providing support and education to fellow officers.

Current and former DREs take pride in their role, and believe they positively impact their communities.



“So, aside from giving me more tools to be more effective at DUI enforcement – I will tell you, I have used it in realms that are like, felony level. I’m finding that we could really apply DRE more in [other areas outside of traffic]. And it – it’s really underutilized and kind of under respected.” – Officer

“I know that there’s been times where there’s a request for DREs and then they go unanswered. And whether that’s a lack of people being available when they’re working, or just a lack of numbers. And then one of the problems that we have that people get discouraged I think, from calling, because every time they call there’s never one available. So, they stop asking at that point, too.” – Detective

Finding #4:

Suggestions for DRE Program Improvement



- Emphasized need to increase the number of certified DREs.
- More opportunity for training on impairment signs and current drug trends.
- Some DREs seek updated technology (e.g., automatic blood pressure cuffs, tablets) to improve evaluations.

“I think it’s an amazing program. And I’m so grateful that I went through the program, and I am so grateful for that education. The DRE program did more to make me a good cop than anything else that I went through. Nothing, nothing compares to the DRE program.” – Captain

Survey Results

Finding #1:
Plans for Re-Certification

81% report planning to stay certified.

47% plan to remain certified for at least 10 years; 18% until retirement.

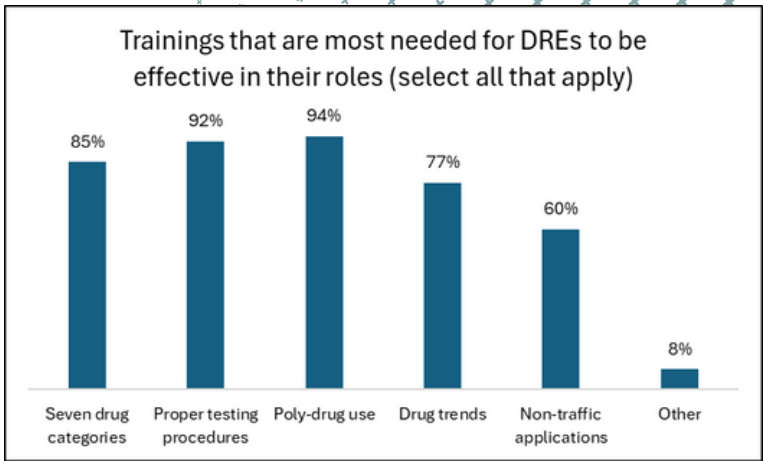
Finding #2:
Levels of Satisfaction

77% were extremely or somewhat satisfied with their participation in the DRE program.

88% are extremely or somewhat likely to recommend the program to other officers.

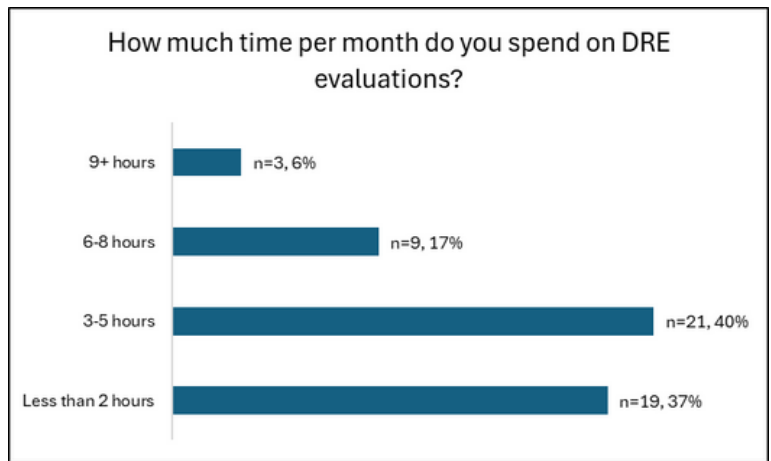
Finding #3:
DRE School & Training

42% felt very well prepared by the DRE school for DRE-involved situations, over 90% feel as though they rarely or never encounter situations for which they are unprepared for.



Finding #4:
Job Duties & Utilization

88% complete 2 or less full DRE evaluations per month.



Finding #5:
Call Out-System

34% report calling into the Washington State Patrol callout system every day or most days.

58% report they never, or very rarely, call into the WSP callout system.

75% report receiving two or fewer callouts per month.

DREs largely report that the lack of callouts was due to the preference of non-DREs skip to blood warrants. Many also cite non-DRE officers may be uneducated on when to call

Finding #6:
Adjudication Participation

52% reported testifying in court in their role as a DRE.

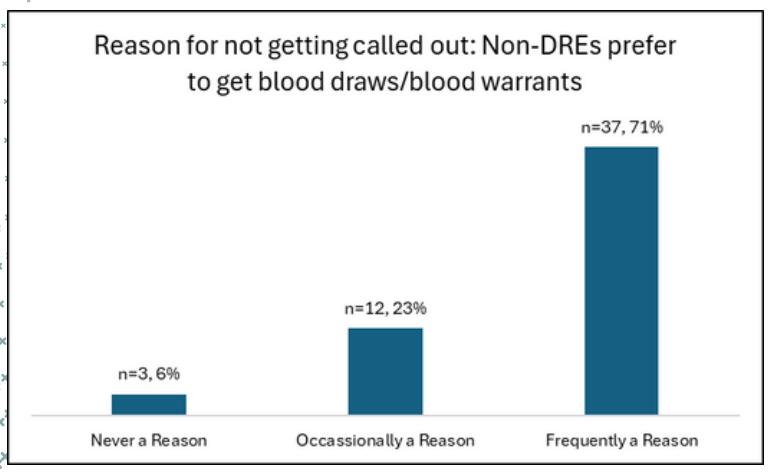
Most respondents note having very minimal interactions and infrequent contact with prosecutors.

Finding #7:
Perceptions of non-DRE officers & leadership

88% believe their agency extremely or somewhat support the DRE program.

65% report feeling valued by non-DRE officers.

60% has had someone express criticism/concern about the DRE program or their service.



Finding #8:

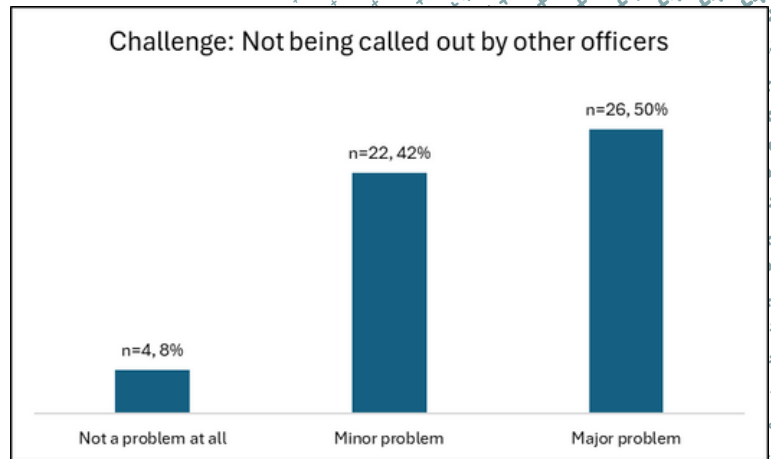
Challenges & Recommendations

The lack of incentives provided for DREs can be frustrating, especially regarding the extensive work it takes to maintain certification.

Calls for more DREs, better technology, and enhanced leadership support.

DREs highlighted the continuing need for more training and education, with a focus on continuing professional development activities and staying updated on new drug trends and their effects post-initial training.

DREs cite that the biggest challenges they face are not being called out by other officers, a lack of certified DRE officers, and declining perceptions of the program.



Policy Recommendations

Increase DREs and DRE usage: DREs noted that there were not enough DREs to cover the state, partially resulting in other law enforcement professionals not calling them out. In addition, more training on the value of DREs for non-DREs may increase the frequency with which DREs are used. Lastly, many DREs noted that their skillset has value outside of traffic cases and should be encouraged in those contexts.

Enhance Training and Education: Some DREs were not satisfied with post-school trainings and found that they did not relate to their job duties. Trainings on drug trends, polydrug use, and refreshers on how to conduct proper evaluation steps were all suggested by DREs.

Improve Callout System: There is a need to review the callout system, which is used to notify and deploy officers for specialized tasks, such as responding to incidents requiring DREs. Many DREs report not using the system, which may result in fewer callouts and fewer evaluations. It may make sense to commission a small study to help determine an optimal callout system that officers will frequently check-in to.

Boost Support: Enhance backing from agency leaders and other officers to ensure that DREs receive recognition for and opportunities to conduct their work. Leadership support in particular is crucial for integrating DRE expertise into everyday law enforcement operations.

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*Washington State University
1 mary.dhondt@wsu.edu
2 dale.willits@wsu.edu

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³WTSC Impairment Dashboard. (2024). *Washington Traffic Safety Commission*.

<https://wtsc.wa.gov/impairment-dashboard/>

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