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## R.I.'s spot on drunk-driving list a concern

A national group says the state leads the country in the percentage of vehicle fatalities related to alcohol, a situation state officials vow to address.

01:00 AM EST on Tuesday, November 29, 2005

**BY BRUCE LANDIS**  
 Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE -- The state's drunken-driving statistics have again landed it on the "Fatal Fifteen" list compiled by a national traffic safety group led by doctors.

Since Rhode Island had the highest proportion of alcohol-related fatal accidents in the nation again last year, 50.6 percent, it is at the top of the list compiled by the group End Needless Death on Our Roadways. The list was released yesterday.

If Governor Carcieri has anything to do with it, the renown won't be

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repeated.

"It's a distinction that no state wants," said spokesman Michael Maynard, "and Governor Carcieri is committed to get the state off that list."

Janice Loiselle, the head of the state Office of Highway Safety, said Rhode Island is making progress, but that the 2004 statistics are "still unacceptable."

Loiselle said she hopes a variety of factors will help, including more police patrols and a tightening of anti-drunken-driving laws she expects in the coming legislative session.

Maynard said the governor will try again to persuade the General Assembly to close the loophole law enforcement officials say undermines the state's drunken-driving enforcement.

The loophole is the modest penalty for refusing to take a Breathalyzer test for alcohol, which has contributed to the state's having the highest refusal rate in the nation, according to federal statistics.

Where a driver refusing a breath test loses his license for three months, a driver convicted of driving under the influence for the first time loses his license for six months. By refusing to take the breath test, drivers stopped by the police deny prosecutors the best evidence of driving under the influence, a measurement of their blood alcohol level.

In Rhode Island, the number of fatalities and the number and proportion of alcohol-related fatalities dropped last year. The state had 83 fatalities in 2004 compared to 104 in 2003. Of those, 42 were alcohol-related last year compared to 59 the year before. The percentage fell from 57 percent to 50 percent. However, the numbers in other states declined, too,

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leaving Rhode Island with the biggest proportion of alcohol-related fatalities again.

To get the unwanted top spot on the list, Rhode Island edged out Puerto Rico, where 50.2 percent of the fatalities were alcohol-related. At the other end of the list, Utah had the smallest proportion of alcohol-related fatalities, 24.32 percent.

Massachusetts and Connecticut were also included in the top 15.

By some other measures, Rhode Island's highway safety record looks better. The state has only 7.68 traffic fatalities per 100,000 population, about half as many as the national average, 14.52.

Loiselle said that the police stepped up their enforcement starting the day before Thanksgiving, and that effort will continue through the holidays.

She also said that she is "extremely optimistic" that legislators will move to close the loophole after repeated failures. Governor Carcieri and Attorney General Patrick C. Lynch have both been pushing for tighter anti-drunken-driving laws, but the legislation died last session in the House Judiciary Committee.

However, House Speaker William J. Murphy, D-West Warwick, has since replaced Rep. Robert E. Flaherty, D-Warwick, who chaired the committee, with Rep. Donald J. Lally, D-Narragansett. Murphy also said that he will support some version of legislation to tighten the penalty for refusing to take a breath test for alcohol, a priority of anti-drunken-driving advocates.

Dr. Thomas Esposito, a co-chairman of the doctors' group and head of Loyola University's Injury Analysis and Prevention Program, describes drunken driving as "a major public health problem."

Nationally, while the number of impaired-driving deaths has fallen, the reduction has reached a plateau at "levels that are still unacceptably high," said Esposito.

Last year, nearly 17,000 persons were killed in alcohol-related crashes, nearly 6,000 of them in the "Fatal Fifteen" states.

Esposito said that society ought to be able to deal with this "health problem" as it has in virtually eliminating polio.

He said it would require a variety of measures, including education, legal steps and law enforcement, safer cars and better seat-belt use.

The doctors' group chose the proportion of alcohol-related fatalities as its benchmark because the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration considers it particularly important, Esposito said.

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