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# MADD Rates the States: A Media Advocacy Event to Advance the Agenda Against Alcohol-Impaired Driving

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The viewpoints expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of MADD.

## Synopsis .....

*The "Rating the States" (RTS) Program of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is designed*

*to bring public attention to the status of State government efforts to combat alcohol-impaired driving. MADD's 1993 report, which evaluated each State with a grade from A to D, brought renewed visibility to MADD's fight for new prevention policies and helped to advance key State legislation. Because of MADD's national press conference and other media activities, more than 60 million Americans saw or heard a news story related to the program.*

*This article outlines the program's objectives and methodology, efforts to publicize the results, and what was achieved in terms of news media coverage and in advancing public policy change. The RTS Program is a proven media advocacy strategy for prompting State legislatures and Governors to enact new policies. The article concludes with guidelines for other public health advocacy groups that may want to emulate this strategy.*

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**I**N 1990, MOTHERS AGAINST DRUNK DRIVING (MADD), based in Irving, TX, announced an ambitious plan for the nation's fight against drunk driving: reducing the proportion of alcohol-related traffic fatalities by 20 percent by the year 2000 ("20 By 2000"). Key to this plan was a comprehensive statement of State legislative priorities, including administrative license revocation (ALR) and lowering the per se limit to .08 BAC (blood alcohol content) (1).

To advance its public policy agenda, MADD joined with Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (Advocates), based in Washington, DC, to develop the "Rating the States" (RTS) Program, a so-called report card on the nation's fight against alcohol-impaired driving. The 1993 report was an update of the progress made by each of the 50 States since 1991, when the first RTS report was issued (2).

The RTS Program is a proven example of media advocacy, a new paradigm in public health in which health educators use the media to galvanize political action and change. As Wallack and his colleagues (3)

describe it, media advocacy is an effort to move public discourse from a focus on individual blame to a more proper focus on societal conditions and institutional arrangements that are at the root of public health problems. Ultimately, media advocacy is a source of power for citizen groups to make their concerns known and to build support for changes in public policy.

Other groups periodically issue political report cards, but none does so with the comprehensiveness of MADD or its specific focus on promoting policy change.

## Governance of the RTS Program

Since its founding in 1980, MADD frequently has been asked to identify the best and worst States on the basis of their efforts to combat alcohol-impaired driving. An evaluation of this sort, with the political ramifications it would cause, would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for government agencies to carry out. In contrast, MADD has a national

vantage point from which to collect and analyze the information needed for such an evaluation, and it also has both the capability and moral authority to use the results to promote further progress in public policy.

MADD's public policy committee voted in early 1990 to undertake the first "Rating the States" project. Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety came forward as a co-sponsor. A 13-member task force was assembled that included representatives of both organizations plus the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Mid-America Research Institute, National Commission Against Drunk Driving, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), National Public Services Research Institute, and the National Transportation Safety Board. Members of the task force were selected on the basis of their involvement in public policy advocacy, legislative research, or highway safety program evaluation. Results of the first survey were released in 1991.

To launch the revised RTS Program in 1993, MADD and Advocates created a 22-member task force. Twelve members came from MADD's board of directors or worked in its national office. Additional members came from NHTSA, National Association of Governors' Highway Traffic Safety Representatives, Mid-America Research Institute, and Boston University. The task force first met in July 1992. Five subsequent meetings were held to supervise development of the RTS questionnaire.

### **The "Rating the States" Questionnaire**

The content of the RTS questionnaire was drawn from elements of MADD's "20 By 2000" plan that had been released in 1990. Key elements in this plan had been selected based on research findings about effective countermeasures, recommendations from highway safety professionals, and suggestions made by MADD's citizen activists. The questionnaire covered 11 content areas, which are described in the box on page 242.

The questions themselves were designed to elicit specific information on current laws, enforcement, and prevention programs. Some questions were asked despite expectations that the answers might be difficult to obtain, with the hope that States might be prompted to begin collecting such information.

Task force members drafted the questions, with review and suggestions by outside reviewers. Word-ing of questions was shaped by two considerations—to make the responses as easily quantifiable as possible and to avoid misunderstandings due to variations in terminology from State to State. Prior to

finalizing the questionnaire, the task force sought input from both Federal and State officials and other highway safety experts.

Once finalized, the questionnaire was mailed to the Governor's Highway Safety Representative in each State and to a State MADD leader, who was encouraged to follow up with State officials until they supplied the requested information. Communication was maintained between the task force, the MADD national office, and the MADD State leaders during the entire data collection period to ensure a high level of response from the States.

### **Determining the Grades**

The system used to grade each State was based on the task force's assessment of the relative importance of each of the 11 content areas. Each content area was assigned a weight, with the total weights equal to 100. Because of its importance, the statistics and records area was divided into two subcategories, which were weighted separately.

Questions within each content area were grouped by topic, and then each grouping was weighted based on its importance to the content area. In determining how much each question was worth, consideration was given to the difficulty of obtaining the information and the reliability of the data. If a question required estimates rather than exact figures, or if most States would be unable to obtain the necessary information, the question was given a lower weight.

A coding scheme was developed for each question to assign points for different responses. When there were several response alternatives from which respondents could choose, point values for each response were determined ahead of time. Responses to open-ended questions were judged according to predetermined guidelines. Point values for unanticipated or innovative answers were developed as needed.

Numerical data were converted to population-based rates (for example, number of arrests per 1,000 licensed drivers) whenever possible. Points were then awarded in a fashion similar to "grading on a curve," so that States with the best rates received the maximum number of points for that question, while those with the worst rates received zero points. Whenever possible, data were provided or validated by NHTSA, the FBI, or other sources that have nation-wide data systems in place.

Whenever a State did not respond to a particular question, and MADD was unable to obtain the information through other means, the State was given a score slightly below the national average. A value

## Identified Needs in 11 Content Areas Used to Rate the States in MADD's 1993 Program

**1. Governor's leadership.** A Governor can help shape the direction of a State's anti-impaired driving effort in various ways, ranging from sponsorship of legislative measures to the appointment of a special task force. Criteria for grading this content area included the following: (a) establishing a special task force on alcohol-impaired driving; (b) providing for the participation of citizen-advocates in the task force; and (c) endorsing MADD's "20 By 2000" objectives.

**2. Statistics and records.** Key elements include the assessment of alcohol or other drug involvement in traffic crashes, testing surviving drivers for blood alcohol content, and the availability of arrest and conviction records for use in the adjudication of criminal charges.

**3. Enforcement.** From the standpoint of general deterrence, MADD regards the use of highly publicized sobriety checkpoints and other intensive enforcement measures to be essential. Information was also sought on the use of advanced enforcement technologies, such as passive breath alcohol testers and in-vehicle video cameras, but a State's grade was not affected by the lack of such equipment.

**4. Administrative and criminal sanctions.** MADD supports a system of increasingly severe penalties, both criminal and administrative, if offenders continue to drive impaired. Administrative license revocation was weighted most heavily because of research that demonstrates its value in reducing alcohol-related traffic crashes. Also assessed was the average length of time from arrest to trial in each State and the use of mandatory minimum sentences.

**5. Regulatory control and availability.** Prevention of alcohol sales to people younger than age 21 is a MADD priority, so related measures, such as sting operations or vendor registration of kegs, were given greater weight. States requiring responsible hospitality training for servers and management were rated higher, as were States limiting reduced-price promotions such as "happy hours" and other irresponsible marketing practices. Support for designated driver or safe ride programs also earned points.

**6. Legislation.** Driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs is considered a crime in

virtually every State. The Rating the States (RTS) evaluation gave higher marks to States that had passed priority legislation such as administrative license revocation, .08 BAC illegal per se limit for adults, and limits on charge reduction and diversion programs (which reduce criminal sanctions in return for community service, alcoholism treatment, or attendance at alcohol education programs).

**7. Prevention and public awareness.** States have a key role to play in keeping the issue of alcohol-impaired driving on the public agenda. The RTS evaluation looked for evidence of creative State programs to reach youth and other high-risk populations as well as special campaigns to publicize anti-drunk driving laws and their enforcement.

**8. Youth issues.** The minimum drinking age law, now on the books in all 50 States, is an effective prevention tool for reducing alcohol-related traffic crashes among youth. A good way to promote compliance with the age 21 law is to impose a BAC limit of .00 for minors—that is, a policy of "zero tolerance" for any measurable amount of alcohol in the body. Other valuable approaches include provisional licensing for drivers younger than 18, distinctive and tamper-proof licenses for drivers younger than 21, and passage of "use and lose" laws that impose driver's license penalties on minors found in possession of alcohol.

**9. Self-sufficiency programs.** To create reliable funding for anti-impaired driving programs, dedicated revenue from a combination of sources is needed. One source of revenue is fines and fees levied against convicted impaired drivers. Another potential source is alcohol beverage taxes.

**10. Innovative programs.** Development of new or innovative programs was seen in the RTS evaluation as a sign of a State's ongoing commitment to finding new solutions to the drunk driving problem.

**11. Victim issues.** MADD's top legislative priority in this area is to establish a "victim bill of rights" to ensure that victims receive justice and equal protection under the law. States with victim impact panels and "victim ombudsman" programs were also given higher ratings.

slightly below the mean score was used in place of missing or incomplete responses because that information tended to be in areas of weakness for that State.

Based on this scoring system, the task force assigned letter grades from A to D to each State's performance in each of the 11 areas, plus an aggregate grade. The task force assigned similar grades for the nation as a whole. Unfortunately, late arrival of some States' responses led to errors, but out of 560 grades issued, errors were reported in only five instances. MADD issued press releases to correct the record and made corrections in copies of the report.

Each State's report card also included detailed information on the number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities, the amount of change seen in those figures from earlier years, and the estimated direct costs of alcohol-related crashes. As in the first report, the 1993 report noted each State's strengths and weaknesses in their legislation and programs.

Grades for the nation's overall effort in each of the 11 content areas were based on the proportion of all questions in each area that were answered favorably by the States, plus information about Federal legislation and programs, national opinion polls, and other research.

### National Report Card

The United States as a whole was assigned a grade of B- for the nation's collective effort to combat impaired driving. The nation received its highest grades of B- in four content areas—leadership, statistics and records, prevention and public awareness, and youth issues. For self-sufficiency programs, the nation earned its lowest grade, a D.

The highest grade received by any State, A-, was earned by Illinois (see table). Four States earned a B+—Arizona, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Ohio. The lowest grade received by any State, D-, was earned by Mississippi. Grades of D or D+ were also earned by Alabama, Idaho, Missouri, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming.

### Publicizing the Results

MADD and Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety released the results from the 1993 survey at a Washington, DC, press conference on November 23, 1993, just before the Thanksgiving holiday. This date was chosen for maximum impact in the news media. Thanksgiving ushers in the annual holiday season, a period when the number of alcohol-related traffic

MADD's 1993 State report card: aggregate grades of progress against alcohol-impaired driving, by State

State	Grade	State	Grade
Alabama	D+	Montana	C
Alaska	C	Nebraska	B-
Arizona	B+	Nevada	B-
Arkansas	C+	New Hampshire	C
California	B	New Jersey	B
Colorado	B	New Mexico	B+
Connecticut	C	New York	B-
Delaware	C	North Carolina	B+
D.C.	C	North Dakota	D
Florida	C+	Ohio	B+
Georgia	C	Oklahoma	C-
Hawaii	C+	Oregon	B
Idaho	D+	Pennsylvania	B
Illinois	A-	Rhode Island	C
Indiana	C	South Carolina	B-
Iowa	C+	South Dakota	C+
Kansas	B-	Tennessee	C-
Kentucky	C+	Texas	C
Louisiana	C-	Utah	B-
Maine	C	Vermont	D+
Maryland	B	Virginia	C
Massachusetts	C-	Washington	C
Michigan	C	West Virginia	C-
Minnesota	B	Wisconsin	C
Mississippi	D-	Wyoming	D
Missouri	D+		

crashes typically increases, and the news media are eager for stories on the subject.

MADD facilitated coverage by distributing both video and audio news releases of the Washington press event in addition to a traditional press release. On the same day, local MADD officials across the country held their own press conferences to announce the grades received by their State. Many of these events included State officials as well as MADD and Advocates representatives.

Media interest in the RTS report was considerable, with total audience exposure to the story estimated at 62.5 million people, counting both the broadcast media and newspapers. Highlights from the national coverage included news stories on NBC's "Nightly News" and CNN, interviews with MADD leaders on ABC's "Nightline" and "CBS This Morning," and articles by the Associated Press and USA Today.

Material from MADD's video news release (VNR) was aired on at least 364 different newscasts nationwide, with a total confirmed audience of nearly 27 million viewers. The VNR was used in two-thirds of the nation's 209 television markets.

In addition, several local stations produced their own material, either by sending a crew to the Washington press conference or by covering a local MADD event. These efforts were seen by an additional 22.3 million viewers.

The audio news release was sent to more than

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2,000 radio stations, resulting in an additional estimated audience of 1.2 million. Several State radio networks covered the story by interviewing State MADD representatives, reaching an additional 373,300 listeners.

In States with relatively high grades, several MADD leaders expressed concern that the positive news coverage might reduce the impetus for further progress. In States with relatively low grades, some MADD leaders expressed fear that the ratings might jeopardize MADD's working relationships with State officials. In fact, in a few of these States, harsh reactions by State officials led local MADD leaders to disavow the survey.

Although some State officials expressed dissatisfaction with their State evaluation, more often the report led to renewed concern about the problem and, in many cases, reinvigorated efforts to fight alcohol-impaired driving, such as the following actions:

**Alabama D+.** On April 19, 1994, the Governor appointed a special task force on alcohol-impaired driving that includes MADD representatives.

**California B.** The head of the State's alcohol and drug program, who expressed displeasure with the RTS report, met with MADD to explore how to work together in the future.

**Idaho D+.** A constitutional amendment for victim rights was passed by the legislature and appeared on the November 1994 ballot.

**Massachusetts C-.** A legislative package that had been in committee for 18 months finally moved forward after release of the RTS report. A new law enacted in May 1994 included a presumptive (not per se) limit of .08 BAC, a .02 BAC limit for youth, and administrative license revocation.

**Michigan C.** MADD was invited to participate in a State-sponsored Alcohol Issues Forum.

**Missouri D+.** The Governor, who had complained about the RTS report prior to its release, made plans to appoint a special task force with MADD repre-

sentation. MADD has since collaborated with the Governor to promote his legislative package.

**Pennsylvania B.** Legislative leaders promised MADD that a bill for administrative license revocation would be put on a "fast track."

**Virginia C.** Passage of a new legislative package was expedited. The bill signed by the Governor includes the .08 BAC limit, a .02 BAC limit for youth, and vehicle impoundment.

## **Guidelines for Future Programs**

The "Rating the States" Program has several features that helped ensure news media interest and bring attention to MADD's public policy agenda. Any public health group that wants to develop such a media event should examine its capacity to replicate these key program elements.

First, MADD is a highly credible grassroots organization with widespread public recognition and support. MADD's membership is dominated by victims of alcohol-impaired driving, and the organization therefore speaks with moral authority.

Second, people are interested in how their State compares with others. Public officials and ordinary citizens alike want to think that their State is in the forefront in solving important social problems such as drunk driving. Finding out that is not the case can motivate action. Similarly, within a single State, comparisons can be made across local jurisdictions.

Third, complex data about each State was translated into ratings that are familiar to anyone who has attended school in the United States—letter grades from A to D. Each State received a grade in 11 content areas, which maximized the chances that States would have areas of both relative strength and weakness.

This approach also better satisfied the news media's needs for readily accessible information about each State. In contrast, the RTS report for 1991 only singled out the top 10 States in each content area, which news reporters said was too limiting for their purposes.

Fourth, a few of the ratings focused specifically on the actions of State leaders, including the Governor, criminal justice officials, and the legislature. Poor grades received by some officials generated political controversy, which frequently drew news media attention.

Fifth, MADD contracted with Bill Bronrott Communications, a public relations firm based in the Washington area, to set up the national press conference and contact news agencies and with Washington Independent Productions to produce the

video and audio news releases. Whether outside consultants or firms are paid or work *pro bono*, their expertise, coupled with their extensive media contacts, is usually necessary to mount a professional event.

MADD's experience with "Rating the States" leads to several additional recommendations for conducting this type of program:

- Time the release of the report so that it is germane to the vast majority of State administrations currently in office. In general, avoid the months just before and just after a major national election.
- Identify a single State agency that will be responsible for gathering and reporting the requested information and can serve as a point of contact.
- Notify the Governor's office in advance about the survey and the ratings program.
- When distributing the surveys to the States, describe how the ratings will be calculated and explain the consequences of not participating or not providing complete and factual information.
- Give State officials at least 3 months to complete the questions, since information may have to be gathered from several different agencies.
- If Federal data on the States are available, have State officials confirm that data, rather than report their own. Doing so will ensure greater consistency across the States.
- Extensive followup may sometimes be needed to get complete information. Even so, some data will be missing, and there needs to be a procedure for determining the score to be assigned in such cases.
- To the extent possible, develop a procedure for double-checking the accuracy of reported information. Opponents will seize upon discrepancies or inaccuracies in the report in order to undermine it.
- Questions should be prepared with the help of experienced researchers and content experts in the relevant disciplines, including both current and former State officials.
- All questions should be pretested so that their interpretation by State officials does not vary from State to State.
- Questions should be answerable from information that is readily available to State officials. Questions that might be difficult for States to answer should be included only if they have very high educational value.
- Avoid open-ended questions to the extent possible, since these are more difficult to grade.
- If surveys are done on a periodic basis, obtain information on what each State has accomplished (for example, new laws, changes in enforcement levels,

new public awareness campaign) since the last report was issued.

- Include objective indicators of each State's basic performance. For example, the RTS report included State-level data showing 10-year trends in the number and proportion of traffic fatalities that were alcohol-related.
- For questions involving numeric responses, consider whether the States' responses should be translated into a rate against total population or some other appropriate baseline.
- Establish objective criteria for assigning grades prior to distributing the questionnaires. The scoring system should give greater weight to high priority items.
- Time should be built into the schedule to allow State officials to respond to a preliminary report so that any necessary corrections can be made prior to release.
- Solicit recommendations from State officials and others on how to improve the data collection and rating process. For example, feedback from some reporters suggested that the 1993 RTS report gave too much information and recommended that a simpler report card with fewer grades be used for ease of media presentation.

## Conclusion

MADD and Advocates hoped that the 1993 "Rating the States" report would serve as both a call for continued action and a "road map" to guide State and local efforts to fight drunk driving in the years ahead. MADD officials from several States have reported that this objective is being met.

The RTS Program demonstrates that national surveys of State government action can be used to develop useful information of interest to both the news media and State officials. Public health advocates can look to the RTS Program as a model for bringing to public attention those policy areas in which new legislation or stronger programs are required.

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