

New Mexico police force prepares for cannabis legalization

Written by By Molly Adamson Sun Correspondent
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ARIDE program helps officers know how to recognize impaired driving

Law enforcement authorities are preparing for Jan. 1, when recreational cannabis will become legal in New Mexico. Police are preparing for the change by investing in DWI training.

Charles Files, the New Mexico Drug Recognition Expert program coordinator, said that the Advanced Roadside Impairment Detection and Enforcement program, which began in 2009, has seen an uptick in officer participation. He explained that the program is a two-day course and that the state offers it 16 times a year. About 250 officers participate in the program each year, and Files said they've had about 1,500 people go through the program so far.

The McKinley County Sheriff's Office wants to remind the public that even with the new cannabis law, rules and regulations will still be in place.

Marijuana use will only be legal for people 21 years old and older, and they can only have up to two ounces of cannabis, 16 grams of cannabis concentrates, and 800 milligrams of infused edibles. Marijuana plants can only be grown inside a person's house, with a limit of 12 per household. It is also illegal to consume marijuana in a vehicle on the roadway or in public.

"The community needs to know that the sheriff's office is committed to keeping our roads safe

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and enforcing driving under the influence laws, which include drugged driving,” Undersheriff James Maiorano III said in a press release.

That’s where the ARIDE comes in. Files explained that there is no ARIDE program certification, but it is meant to make enforcement officers better at their jobs by helping them identify the possible signs that someone is under the influence of drugs.

Files said that there isn’t a list that officers can use to determine if someone is under the influence of marijuana or another type of drug. An officer will need to use his or her training and past experience to determine whether or not they think the driver is under the influence.

But they can have a general idea of what to look for. Files said that someone under the influence of marijuana may have slow movements, or may have remained at a green light and let it go through a couple of cycles. Files also said a person’s level of impairment could be affected by their metabolism, body type, tolerance, when they took the drug, and how much they took.

The program’s purpose is to familiarize officers with all the possible factors that may make it unsafe for someone to be driving a vehicle. It gives the officers more confidence and the knowledge that they know what to look for when it comes to impaired driving.

Field sobriety tests can test for more than alcohol consumption. Files said the tests can help officers assess the situation, but said it takes a lot more for the officer to decide to make an arrest. When it comes to drunk driving, Files said it’s not just about if a person blew a .08 or not. He explained that people can blow below a .08 and still get charged with a DWI, if the officer thinks it is unsafe for them to be driving.

“Impairment is impairment, and it really doesn’t have any business behind the wheel,” Files said.