

**Making a Difference**  
**A Report on Road Safety Co-ordination in New Zealand**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to report on the outcome of a study into the role of road safety co-ordinators based in or contracted to Local Authorities to co-ordinate activity as part of the Community Road Safety Programme (CRSP). The study was undertaken in order gain a greater understanding of Road Safety Co-ordination in New Zealand.

**Introduction**

55 local councils or clusters of smaller rural councils employ a Road Safety Co-ordinator to carry out community based road safety with their communities. Apart from one or two in large urban settings they receive more than half of the operational and project funds required from the Land Transport Safety Authority's (LTSA) Community Road Safety Programme (CRSP). Although Councils employ the co-ordinators, the monitoring of the work of Road Safety Co-ordinators is also the task of the LTSA's twelve Regional Education Advisers (REAs). These advisers provide advice and support for Councils in general and Co-ordinators in particular.

Road Safety Co-ordinators are tasked with planning and implementing road safety activity with interested people from their local communities using a community development process. There has been a renewed focus on community development in the last two years. Six Road Safety Co-ordinators were interviewed from a variety of community settings: urban, rural, north and south island. The chosen group of four women and two men were not only working in diverse geographical and cultural settings; they also differed in age and years of experience.

**Initial attraction to the role**

From the moment each Road Safety Co-ordinator began their interview one could sense the passion they had for the work. They came to road safety co-ordination from a variety of different careers, many from teaching, community work, or from a health promotion background:

*"I came into the job quite by chance. Now looking back I realise that I was always interested in road safety because I always felt that the constant death and injury on the road was such a waste of valuable contributing lives."*

*"At the beginning you have a lack of confidence in your ability to do the job well. You develop a passion and a drive for the work. I have learned not to let go – to keep pushing for the things I consider important."*

*"The job is challenging and fun. I like working at the Council. It feels like you're at the heart of the community. You can really make a difference if you've got enough energy."*

### **Personal skills and strengths**

The road safety co-ordinators were able to express very honestly the strengths they felt they brought to the many tasks inherent in the role:

*"I'm a communicator, a listener, and I encourage people to get the best out of themselves. I love working with young people. I seem to be good at working with older people too – don't know why. I try to have personal integrity. I'm irrepressibly cheerful too."*

*"Coming up with ideas, I'm good at adapting too. If I can't do something I'll create a new way to achieve the same end result. I think I'm really well suited to this job. I really like it."*

*"The marketing and communication aspects of the job. Bringing in people or organisations who haven't been involved. Being prepared to use new talent to get ideas across. Networking particularly with the Police, I've have had great feedback from the strategic partners."*

The co-ordinators also did not hesitate to name the things that they would like to strengthen in themselves either,

*"I think I'd like to be challenged a lot more in the way that I do things so that everything is justified – that its 'best practice' because I don't think I'm doing best practice all the time. A little bit of me is saying we could learn something from the Health Promotion discipline – shift towards being more academic. You've then got something tangible that you can measure and you write it in a way that your peers are able to follow. But the problem with that approach for me is that sometimes health promotion talks about people as a group – as a thing, rather than people as individuals with blood flowing through their veins."*

*"My ability to report the facts concisely - that's something I find hard to do."*

*"When I took the role on I never envisaged that it would be as hands on as it is. I never realised just how hard, how many hours I would have to do to achieve an ultimate goal for any one thing (issue). It's all very time consuming. I walked into it blind, like many other co-ordinators I would say, and even after [all these] years and I don't think I've got it right yet."*

## **Community knowledge**

One of the characteristics of all of the co-ordinators was the wealth of knowledge they have about their communities. When asked about the place where they live and work they each gave a full description of their community in all its diversity. The city people described the characteristics of each suburb and the range of communities within each. The people based in rural areas explained how the people in one small town varied from another:

*"My main town is generally middle class but there is the spread from beneficiaries who still survive quite well because the cost of living is pretty cheap down here. There are also farmers who are pretty comfortably off. Now we've also got a large industry that's employing a lot of young guys who are earning pretty well and using the money to buy flash fast cars. In another part of the district we have huge sheep stations. The owners have important social standing; it's a very European mono-cultural environment. In town there are office/retail workers or mechanics and other blue-collar workers, or factory labour. The issues are open road speed and fatigue. A lot of our young drivers are driving from 13. They are mostly licensed by 15 and they breach the terms of the licence all the time and share the costs with their mates."*

## **The role of road safety co-ordination**

The co-ordinators have a clear sense of their role as initiators of local road safety community action using a community development process.

*"Road safety is everyone's responsibility. The Road Safety Co-ordinator is there to galvanise action, network and educate. Our job is to try to bring together as many sections of the community as possible so that we have a healthy, well functioning road environment. The Road Safety Co-ordinator should try to network with everybody who is involved in this field. To enable this ground-swell of activity to influence council decisions. A huge strength of the position is the community relations role."*

*“Our role is to support, advise, encourage and provide the necessary resources. I believe there is still a place for the Road Safety Co-ordinator to deliver some projects to the population base because that’s our way of keeping an ear to the ground – what works etc. We don’t want to lose that.”*

*“Road safety is better resourced than other community activity here. When I go along to community meetings I’m the one who can make things happen. I have something to offer. You don’t always need money for community action, but it sure helps. I feel our resourcing is at a pretty optimal level at the moment.”*

*“Community development is time consuming, it takes time to get the momentum up. Some organisations have a big turnover of staff and that is detrimental to community development. It takes time to build up credibility so continuity is important. Staff turnover is the Achilles’ heel of community development. The strength is working with people, building relationships, and then everyone giving 110% to an initiative. It’s great, and a sign of a really healthy community.”*

### **The role within Council**

The co-ordinators have quite an isolated role in their communities. Most work in the engineering and public works section of a city or district council. They are usually the only person doing their job and when it comes to a local road safety issue they are the first point of contact. Meeting the expectations of council staff, councillors and the LTSA can be difficult.

*“People expect that you’ll deal with their problem with the utmost urgency. It weighs fairly heavily as you try to meet the needs of diverse sections of the population. You have got to be persistent and see things through. Lots of people try to pull you in different directions.”*

*“They [Councillors] want to see things around the city. Visual things like billboards and the speed trailer. There is also the expectation that there will be a larger component for Maori in the programme. The Council and the community want to be informed.”*

Some co-ordinators that have been in place in city councils for a number of years have seen a large increase in recognition for their role. Over time, as the Council staff, councillors and community witness the successful co-ordination of local road safety activity the co-ordinator is able to influence road safety decision making across a broader range of activity. Consistency and community ownership result in support and respect.

*"Expectations have changed. I used to be a 'tag on' to Traffic and Roading Services. I was expected to raise awareness for road safety externally and internally. I never felt I was part of core business of the Council. Now that's changed. In the past two and a half years road safety has become core business. We are called the Traffic Safety Team now, it will hopefully change soon to become the Road Safety Team – and this team comprises of the Council engineers too.*

*You've got to establish your credibility within local Government. To develop credibility as a person with knowledge who can earn respect in the Council. I can now say things and push for things that would never have been possible when I first started. I am able to do more now because I've been there longer. The expectations of what I can achieve are stronger and I am meeting those expectations. Under the new drive (Local Government Act) towards a community model the expectations are even greater."*

## **Management and supervision**

For some the workplace is encouraging and dependable. Strong support systems are in place at the Council or within the Trust. This is most often the case in the urban areas. In other situations the supervision and support is almost non-existent with no dedicated person responsible for providing supervision and support for the Road Safety Co-ordinator. The interviews exposed poor work conditions and employment policies in some of these cases. Some people are working far in excess of a forty-hour week. Co-ordinators on contract are most at risk.

*"The roading manager who is an engineer is my boss and he doesn't understand what I do. I guess that is my problem. I need to help him understand. I guess I'd have to say it's the LTSA regional adviser that keeps me motivated."*

*"The three councils employ me and the regional council support it as well, and LTSA is a member on the Trust. There are the four councils on the Trust, and some other trustees and the REA from LTSA whom I meet with quarterly. They basically oversee the employment of me but there is no one person who takes a real interest."*

*"There are three engineers and a planning officer with whom I work. It's a committee of four. And I don't report direct, I provide quarterly reports. As a contractor the whole idea behind my position was to have someone independent to be the main contact for the community. It goes up for tender every five years. Road Safety Co-ordination is an extremely isolated position. There's not a person*

*that has the same or even a similar brief to me, even ACC doesn't. We don't have a great pool of people we can call on."*

*The manager is very interested in road safety. She questions and challenges us. She asks us what we need to keep and what we need to change to make gains for road safety. She is saying to the whole team including the engineers "why do we have this problem and what can we do better?" She listens, challenges and is very supportive. She's not an engineer but she is a strong manager and she has earned tremendous respect from the male members of the team too."*

*"Probably the biggest motivational force is me myself because I really do believe that I'm saving lives and that I'm able to initiate some type of change. Next it's the committee who really want to see things done. We have managed to pull the road toll statistics down to single figures in our area. My boss says to me that I do too much work, but I don't think so. To me it's just right. If it needs to be done then it just gets done. I saw this vanload of Maori kids the other day and every single one of them was belted in, that's a great motivation to keep going."*

### **The reality of the community development approach**

Following the review of the CRSP, the LTSA put considerable resources into encouraging Road Safety Co-ordinators to reflect on their practice and to undertake community development approach if this was not their foremost mode of community activity. The co-ordinators in this study were asked to comment on their experience using a community development approach.

*"I hold meetings, go to lots of things, speaking to people. Providing a point of contact for the community, giving them somewhere to go when they have road safety concerns. Altruism is a fairly rare thing these days. You have to provide a carrot to hook them in. There needs to be something in it for them. Then once they are involved they find it quite consuming and they get quite passionate about it. We've got huge commitment for road safety in our community now."*

*"I think you can never have pure community development for certain issues. It works with alcohol and maybe speed issues because they see those as issues. Intersections no way – I've never had a group interested in running intersection campaigns, and if I do I'll eat my hat!"*

*"There was a voluntary group who were interested, with an average age of 70. When I set out what is involved they didn't want to know. They were more interested in finding a pothole in the road and having that as a road safety issue."*

*"I was really proud of, not just myself, but of the fact that I had managed to knit together a fairly disparate bunch of people to get something done that came together. The whole group was proud to own it and that made me feel confident."*

*"Also the activities I have done with young people. Once you come out the other side and see the kids take on something they thought was almost impossible to do, really enjoy it and get some new learning about road safety out of it – that has been really satisfying."*

*"It's the people you meet, such a wide variety of people. They come to see you cross and frustrated about things and you can actually turn them around and get them involved in being part of the solution. So they say 'yes I see that we can do something together' I get a real buzz out of working with people like that. It's such a multicultural society. Sometimes I'm working with youth, community groups, or just people who have an interest, a Sri-Lankan group, Sikh women, other community advisers, or people running community centres. It's just lovely helping people and seeing them becoming self-sustaining in road safety community activity. One example is the local bus station. It was identified as a horrible area, a nasty place. The school kids didn't like walking through it. We got Stagecoach on board, worked with the local Maori trust and all of the local schools were involved. We refurbished the whole bus station and we erected this huge road safety mural. Kids gave up their holidays to work on it. Now the workers and schools in the area continue to do other things in road safety on their own. I'm not needed - it's great. My goal is to do myself out of a job, and then I'll know I've done good work. It took a while, over two years. It does take time. You never actually let go, but they co-ordinate themselves and I can move on to a different area."*

### **They also shared the inevitable low points**

*"When people say they want to work on something, you help them get the funding, and they don't finish it. They go off on huge tangents and get big egos and kind of miss the point. Probably they are trying to save the world instead of saving the community but they lose the plot and don't finish what they've started, that's really disappointing because you know they have the capability to finish it. Maybe we make things too easy. Sometimes they turn themselves around."*

*"Lack of support would be the main thing. You can do so much and be left high and dry. Culturally it can be hard, when you're put down because you are not of that culture. There's also the frustration of trying to get a message across and not succeeding. You start to question yourself – whether you are actually able to make a difference."*

Despite these occasional difficulties, the rewards inherent in working with people and enabling them to plan and implement a solution to a local road safety issue are very evident.

### **Collegial support**

The Road Safety Co-ordinators were asked where they found support for their community work. From their replies it is obvious that networking with colleagues is seen as vital for maintaining good practice and motivation. Although the support is regarded as very necessary it is also hard to find the time for such meetings.

*"My manager, my peers, other stakeholders, the safer communities trust, the youth development co-ordinator, Police colleagues. LTSA is also very encouraging. All of these people are really important to me in this job. I have found the LTSA, other regional advisers and Road Safety Co-ordinators very supportive in anything I have wanted to do."*

*"The mentoring is great in Auckland, both with the REA and other peers. As a region we meet monthly and I always believe that this is the most important meeting I have each month because we share issues. It is a really special team."*

*"I really enjoy having the opportunity to be with other Road Safety Co-ordinators I feel that's happening less and less, just doesn't seem to be time for it. I enjoy that collegiality, I can function without it but I think it helps you become more critical of what you're doing. You've got to have reflection time."*

### **The impact of this vocation on road safety co-ordinations**

The co-ordinators interviewed had some interesting closing remarks to make about the impact that this role has had on their lives, or simply final reflections.

*"I am a much better driver, very aware of being in the public eye. Fatalities really hit home when you're called the Road Safety Co-ordinator and there is a death in your area. It hits pretty hard. Its a really responsible job – very front line and very public. It has high impact and a high workload, not just nine to five, but also weekends and evenings quite regularly. The job is as big as you let it be."*

*"It's really important to have a passion for this work, but at the same time don't let it take you over. At the end of the day you need to go home to your family. Pick your battles, and, if after you've reflected on it you think it's really important to win it – go for it!"*

*"How many jobs pay you to be creative and give you a budget? I dread the day I leave this job because I love it so much. I'm given the freedom to be responsible to myself and I love it. You have the chance to be creative, to work inside or outside – all these elements – it's great. The only downside would be the pay, the job is worth more."*

*"Believing I can help to save a life. Maybe not by changing everyone's attitude but by reaching one person, whether they are young or old, into changing a particular behaviour pattern – the hope that you can save someone."*

### **Reflecting on the interviews**

The passion that many co-ordinators feel for their work was obvious during the interviews. All of them described the sense of 'making a difference' that they felt. The words they used to describe these feelings encapsulated the sense of the worth of the role that enabled them to get through tedious and overwhelming moments. The intensity of commitment that each one of them felt towards the job was surprising in some ways as the co-ordinators had been selected quite randomly with the assumption that there would be varying levels of commitment. This commitment was not reliant on the support they received or the resource level.

The assumption had been made that community development would be a less common approach in the middle of a large city. However the urban co-ordinators interviewed are fully engaged in community development.

From the interviews it is obvious that road safety co-ordination is a very demanding and complex role. It is perhaps undervalued not only in terms of its ability to contribute to change in road safety attitudes and behaviour, but also road safety co-ordination appears to lack recognition as a strategy for significantly contributing to wider transport goals. Road Safety Co-ordinators who have gained the respect and support of their local Councils and communities can play an important role in encouraging community support for the transport sector initiatives. As colleagues they have a wealth of knowledge and skill to contribute to the achievement of NZTS goals.

**Debbie Player, September 2004**