Process evaluation of two remedial programs for alcohol-impaired drivers

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Abstract

Background
The Alberta Motor Association (AMA) administers and delivers the Alberta Impaired Drivers’ Program (AIDP) under contract with Alberta Transportation. As such, it is responsible for the development, delivery, and oversight of two remedial programs for impaired drivers. The successful completion of these programs (Planning Ahead for first offenders and IMPACT for repeat offenders) is a condition of licence reinstatement for all drivers following an impaired driving conviction.

Aims
The Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) was contracted by AMA to undertake a process evaluation of both programs in 2011. The purpose of this evaluation is to identify what is currently working well within the AIDP and, more specifically, the Planning Ahead and IMPACT programs. Other goals of the evaluation are to examine program use and the effectiveness of operations, and to identify potential improvements.

Methods
The approach to answer all the research questions consists of a methodology based on the collection and synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative information. The manner in which this was achieved included focus groups, program observation, analysis of quantitative participant data and the use of a Delphi panel to inform the synthesis of all the data.

Results
Many strengths of the delivery and administration of the Planning Ahead and IMPACT programs have been identified. The adopted methodology has also provided insight into some areas where improvements can be made and ways that the program can be extended to better address the needs of its target population.

Discussion and conclusions
Recommendations based upon the outcomes of the process evaluation of Alberta’s remedial programs will be discussed in detail. Some recommendations can also be useful to other jurisdictions that are considering a review, updates, or modifications to their remedial impaired driver programs.
Background

The Alberta Motor Association (AMA) administers and delivers the Alberta Impaired Drivers’ Program (AIDP) under contract with Alberta Transportation. As such, it is responsible for the development, delivery, and oversight of two remedial programs for impaired drivers in the province. The successful completion of these programs (Planning Ahead for first offenders and IMPACT for repeat offenders) is a condition of licence reinstatement for all drivers following an impaired driving conviction.

TIRF was contracted by AMA to undertake a process evaluation of both impaired driver programs in 2011. The purpose of this evaluation is to identify what is currently working well within the AIDP and, more specifically, the Planning Ahead and IMPACT programs. Other goals of the evaluation are to examine program use and the effectiveness of operations, and to identify potential improvements.

The Planning Ahead program is a one-day psycho-educational course that is currently offered in 18 cities and towns across Alberta. The program is targeted toward first offenders and approximately 4,000 offenders participate in Planning Ahead each year. This represents a majority of the 4,600 individuals convicted for a first impaired driving offence in the province annually.

The main goal of Planning Ahead is to prevent impaired driving by preventing first offenders from becoming repeat offenders. The program is based on the belief that participants have the ability to change. This attitude is reinforced by reminding participants that they are capable of making smart choices and through the use of action plans, they can avoid impaired driving in the future. Other goals of Planning Ahead include teaching participants how to separate drinking and drug use from driving, the importance of zero tolerance for impaired driving, how lifestyles centered around alcohol and drugs lead to higher risk for impaired driving and how impairment affects driving abilities.

The IMPACT program, on the other hand, is targeted towards repeat offenders (i.e., offenders with two or more impaired driving convictions within ten years). This weekend residential course is delivered in Edmonton, Calgary, St. Albert, and Grand Prairie. Approximately 1,000 offenders participate in IMPACT each year and this represents a majority of the 1,400 repeat offenders that are convicted in Alberta on average each year.

The overall objectives of the program are to reduce alcohol and drug use among participants and to reduce subsequent involvement in alcohol and/or drugged driving offences or impaired driving recidivism. To accomplish these goals, IMPACT helps participants to recognize and understand how alcohol and/or drug use has affected their major life areas, assess the degree of problems that alcohol and/or drug use have caused, and make an action plan to deal with any of these problems.

Objectives

The overall objective of the process evaluation is to assess the operational effectiveness of Planning Ahead and IMPACT. A key area of focus is how each program operates and is delivered. More specifically, the goals of the process evaluation are:
IMPACT and Planning Ahead process evaluations

- to determine the use of the programs (e.g. participation rates) and stakeholder's perceptions of the programs;
- to determine the operational effectiveness of Planning Ahead and IMPACT; and,
- to identify potential improvements to each program.

Methods

The methodology used to conduct the process evaluation is based on the collection and synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative information. The manner in which this was achieved included the following steps:

Observation of program delivery

A researcher observed the delivery of the Planning Ahead and IMPACT programs in their entirety. These observational data were used to generate discussion during the focus groups.

Conduct focus groups

A series of focus groups were organized to identify strengths, priority issues, and challenges related to program delivery, and to discuss potential solutions/improvements. Key staff from each of the geographic locations where the programs are offered were asked to participate in these focus groups (one for Planning Ahead and one for IMPACT), either in person or by phone. A third focus group with AIDP staff was also scheduled to gain their perspective about both programs.

Investigate conditions regarding availability and use of sensitive data

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the data needed for this evaluation (e.g., assessment summary reports), it was investigated in a privacy impact assessment if a privacy issue did exist. While no privacy issues were found, a determination was made that obtaining information from outside agencies would be too costly and time consuming. Therefore, it was agreed to use only the data contained in the AIDP database and that were immediately available.

Collect and analyze quantitative participant data

Quantitative information from participants was obtained from course record forms, course evaluations, and the AIDP database and analyzed.

Conduct Delphi panel

The data and information that were obtained in the previous four phases of the process evaluation were compiled and presented to stakeholders for feedback using a Delphi panel. This involved sending out a draft analysis of the results from the process evaluation (e.g., the observation of program delivery, the focus groups, and the data analysis) to a panel of stakeholders who reviewed it and provided their comments.
Finally, once sufficient understanding of all aspects of the program was reached based on the data collected during the process evaluation, the information was synthesized and evaluated with respect to the intended goals of the Planning Ahead and IMPACT programs.

Overall, the information obtained during the process evaluation was interpreted against a "system improvements" paradigm. "System" refers to the context in which strategies and countermeasures are implemented and delivered (e.g., goals of scheme, how participants are processed, levels of communication) and the structures or entities used to deliver these countermeasures to a designated target group (e.g., agency/stakeholder involvement in delivery, the legal system, treatment setting). The ability of each agency/stakeholder to perform their respective responsibilities and also effectively communicate with one another is key to the successful administration of programs such as Planning Ahead and IMPACT.

Results

An examination of the structure, content, and delivery of both the Planning Ahead and IMPACT programs led to several conclusions with respect to the effectiveness of the operation of these programs. What follows is a summary of the strengths and challenges of the programs evaluated and resulting recommendations for program improvements and extensions.

Strengths

Planning Ahead and IMPACT in particular, have rich and thorough curricula containing content that is continuously updated, relevant, and Alberta-specific. The structured and uniform delivery of this content across the province also guarantees that all participants receive the same information and that the course is delivered consistently. The main challenge is for course facilitators to deliver all course content while also allowing time for questions and engaging participants in dialogue about issues that they identify as relevant.

The preventive approach of the programs is also important. Participants are usually reluctant to attend because they view their participation as a punishment. Facilitators work to overcome these reservations and create a supportive and non-judgmental environment that facilitates rapport-building. By the end of the program, most participants note that they took away much more from the experience than they expected which encouraged subsequent lifestyle changes. Overall, participants are very satisfied with these programs.

The delivery of both Planning Ahead and IMPACT is efficient due in part to the clearly defined roles and responsibilities of AIDP staff and course facilitators. Each party understands the tasks that must be completed and executes them according to protocol. Open channels of dialogue between facilitators and AIDP, and the hiring of dedicated professionals have ensured effective and efficient program delivery.

Challenges

While the Planning Ahead and IMPACT programs have several strengths there are also some areas where improvements can be made. First, there is a need to ensure that all individuals who
are required to participate in a remedial program register and complete the program. Failure to do so results in unlicensed driving.

Facilitators stated that they might benefit from additional information on the licence reinstatement process as they sometimes find themselves unable to provide answers to participants’ questions. Facilitators agreed that they would like to have more information provided to them about impaired driving, treatment, driver licensing codes, ignition interlocks, driver abstracts (including those from other provinces) and services that are available in different communities.

Finally, investment in an automated data management system and improvement of data collection procedures are necessary, particularly if the number of program participants increases. An automated system can create efficiencies and improve tracking of participants and use of data to manage the programs. The implementation of an automated system would provide AIDP with an opportunity to better use the data that is collected from both remedial programs.

Recommendations

Resolving scheduling conflicts: There is a chance participants will not attend their scheduled program, resulting in cancelled courses which can be frustrating for facilitators who will lose time and revenue. In order to prevent a scheduling conflict, it may be beneficial to phone all participants a night in advance of their program in order to verify their attendance.

Continue to modify IMPACT and planning ahead curricula: AIDP is encouraged to continue to modify the curricula in accordance with new research and best practices. Facilitators should continue to be consulted prior to major updates so that they may offer suggestions and feedback. Participant comments should also be taken into consideration which can be collected through course evaluations.

Provide facilitators with more resources: More research materials should be made available to course facilitators, such as access to listserves and online journals with the latest research on impaired driving, treatment, and substance dependency which could be circulated by the AIDP Program Developer. Facilitators would also benefit from more information about the availability and quality of community resources, supports, and services in communities across the province.

Make more information available to program participants or potential participants: AMA can make program information more readily available so potential participants are aware of the programs and/or any remedial program requirements. The creation of a booklet, website, or brochure that explains the many requirements relating to licence reinstatement, remedial programs, and interlock requirements would be very helpful.

Improve data collection practices: Because data are important and essential to measure program successes and outcomes, it is recommended that AIDP staff determine what pieces of participant and program data should be collected in consultation with Alberta Transportation. Staff can review the information that is currently collected and entered into the existing system and identify any elements or variables that are missing.
Develop and implement an automated data management system: It is recommended that the AIDP consider the transition from a paper-based system to a fully automated data management system to improve the quality and efficiency of its services. Automation can reduce workload, increase information-sharing, and improve data management.

Identify opportunities for follow-up, relapse prevention, and/or treatment: The inclusion of a follow-up survey, phone call, or meeting with facilitators or even an optional, more intensive treatment program could provide participants with ongoing interaction post-program to assist with identified substance dependency issues to gain control over their drinking. Ultimately, these participants may benefit from additional intervention and this may prove necessary in order to prevent future occurrences of impaired driving.

Offer alternate options for those identified as ‘Problem Participants’: Participants returning to the program multiple times is indicative of the fact that they are not learning from the experience as the offending behaviour has not changed. AMA may consider exploring other avenues or making referrals to more intensive treatment interventions when dealing with repeat participants.

Increase awareness about the planning ahead and IMPACT programs among stakeholders: It appears that stakeholders have limited understanding about the operation of the remedial programs. Providing information about program activities, outcomes, and successes can foster understanding about the important contribution that AMA makes in addressing the impaired driving issue in Alberta. One strategy to create awareness is to organize a meeting among stakeholders to provide updates and discuss broader impaired driving issues in the province.

Identify and implement ideal practices for remedial programs: AMA should utilize the opportunity to network with other jurisdictions, for example with regard to out-of-province offenders, in order to identify common program features as well as challenges that are frequently encountered and potentially update these best practices.

Conclusion

Overall, AMA’s remedial programs are efficient, staffed with dedicated professionals who work collaboratively toward common goals, and well received among the target population. AIDP can continue to modify and expand the program as need dictates and view the program as a success but also as a work in progress. Future goals can include the development of best practices and the extension of the IMPACT program to include an aftercare or follow-up component. The recommendations made from this process evaluation are not unique to only the Albertan remedial programs. These recommendations offer insight into methods for improvement of participation rates and program efficiency which can be applied to and implemented in other similar remedial programs in North America and internationally.