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Speakout: Far too many DUI plea bargains

By Dennis And Valerie Meyer
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The *Rocky Mountain News* ironically misses the point in its argument regarding DUI plea-bargain rates ("Beauprez cheap shot," On Point, Oct. 6, referring to the Oct. 5 *News* story, "Ad sparks backlash"). In defending Jefferson County's 73 percent plea-bargain rate because it happens to be a "lower percentage than the statewide average," the *News* is sending the message that it is acceptable to cut deals for three out of four drunk drivers. In the case of Jefferson County and District Attorney Dave Thomas, merely beating the status quo is not the answer, and it is not safe.

Let's take a look at the facts. In a three-part series on drunk driving in August, the *News* reported that in 1999 and 2000, 31 percent of all traffic deaths were alcohol-related. That figure climbed to 34 percent last year. In that same series, it was also reported that repeat drunk-driving offenders cause four out of every 10 alcohol-related fatalities. If repeat drunk drivers cause four of 10 alcohol-related fatalities, why is it deemed acceptable to cut a deal for three out of every four drunk drivers?

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Unfortunately, we have some direct experience with what the *News* and Dave Thomas so casually refer to as statistics and percentages. Our daughter, Ali, was hit by a drunk driver in 2001 and died as a result in November of 2002. The drunk driver who killed our daughter was a repeat offender. Plea bargaining DUI repeat-offender cases by prosecutors such as Thomas because of limited jail space and crowded court dockets is unacceptable. In discussions with other victims, victims' families, and organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, we feel that we are not alone in this assessment.

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We know that we probably can never stop drunk driving altogether, but there are things that can be done. How prosecutors treat DUI offenders is a deterrent and a key factor in determining whether offenders drink and drive again.

The *News'* defense of Jefferson County's 73 percent plea-bargain rate on DUIs says that it's OK to be part of the problem, not the solution. Tough sanctions make a difference. If DUI offenders are not prosecuted in a meaningful way, they will likely drink and drive again at best and, at worst, take someone's life. Our daughter's killer served less than a year in a work-release program in Jefferson County and is back on the streets again.

The *News* reported that Mesa County had a DUI plea-bargain rate of 51 percent during the same period Jefferson County plea-bargained 73 percent. Though many will argue that this rate is still not acceptable, it shows that a tougher stance on DUI prosecution without bringing the court system to a halt is not only attainable, it's happening.

Coloradans need to ask themselves whether enough is being done to keep our roads safe. We need to ask ourselves whether our prosecutors are doing all they can to take a tough stand on drunk driving.

The hundreds of people killed and injured each year in Colorado by drunk drivers are not just statistics. Whether it's cutting deals for 80 percent or 73 percent of drunk drivers, the answer is the same; it's just too high.

Dennis and Valerie Meyer are residents of Littleton.

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