

LTAP 25th Anniversary

The Safety Circuit Rider Program

Editor's note: This article is part of our ongoing series celebrating Iowa LTAP's 25th anniversary in 2008.

In 1988, transportation experts from the Iowa DOT, FHWA, and the Local Transportation Information Center (LTIC, which would later become CTRE) had a mission: to bring transportation safety training to local agencies through the Iowa LTAP. The product of their collaboration was the Safety Circuit Rider Program—a one-of-a-kind program that would become a national model for transportation safety training.

The goals of the program at its inception were to provide transportation safety training to local street and road employees and to make the training accessible by taking the program to them.

Getting started

Getting the program started was no easy task, says Tom Maze, professor of civil engineering at Iowa State and then-director of LTIC. Maze credits John Whited, then-manager of the LTAP program at the Iowa DOT, with believing in the Safety Circuit Rider Program enough to get it started.

“John kept pushing for the program, even when others thought it was too much trouble,” says Maze.

The persistence of Whited and others paid off. Ed Bigelow, a retired Ida County engineer, became Iowa's—and the nation's—first safety circuit rider in the spring of 1989. He conducted his first workshop, training local officials in interpreting the Iowa DOT's accident location reporting system, in Hamilton County that fall. Workshops on flagging and signing followed closely thereafter.

Bigelow traveled around the state, conducting about 60 safety-related workshops each year in garages, shops, and meeting halls. He was passionate about his work and well-liked by the local agencies he worked with.

“It was because of the good work of Ed Bigelow that the program became a national model,” says Maze.

Success recognized

In 1990 the program won the “Best Overall and Most Efficient Use of Resources”



Current Safety Circuit Rider Tom McDonald (right) teaches a safety workshop.

category in the FHWA's Biennial Safety Award Competition. Jack Latterell, FHWA safety program manager for Iowa, nominated the program for the award.

“I felt that the program deserved attention so that other states could consider similar arrangements,” Latterell says.

By the time Bigelow retired as safety circuit rider in 1996, he had expanded his workshop offerings to include excavation safety, equipment safety, motor grader operation, construction inspection, pavement markings, and roadside design.

Tom McDonald took over the position in 1998, after it was briefly held by Iowa DOT's Mike Jorgensen in 1997. By June of 1998, McDonald was working to develop a new signing workshop and conference that covered MUTCD requirements, sign reflectivity, inspections, and other related subjects. He also offered in-house training on roadside safety, tailored to address topics of interest to a given agency.

Evolving program

“Tom has really shown the potential this position has for new things,” says Iowa LTAP Director Duane Smith. “He adds new workshops every year and has really focused on bringing research findings to local agencies.”

Being involved in research is one of the things McDonald enjoys most about his job.

“When I started as safety circuit rider, the position mostly offered flagging and crash

analysis training,” says McDonald. “Now I am involved a lot more in research and in the sharing of technology that comes from that research, in addition to worker safety training.”

All of these new opportunities have led to more work—more than just one person can handle effectively. That's where Bob Sperry, Iowa LTAP's new local roads safety liaison, comes in.

“Bob will provide face-to-face contact with county engineers to explain the safety circuit rider program and what training is available, with an emphasis on using crash data to help make safety-related decisions,” explains McDonald.

Over the years, the success of the program, and the efforts of Bigelow and McDonald, have not gone unnoticed. The national attention received by Iowa's Safety Circuit Rider Program has led LTAPs in other states to develop similar programs.

Impact

At least 17 LTAP centers now have safety circuit rider programs. There are many more under development, thanks to a pilot program started by FHWA in 2004 to provide funding for safety circuit riders.

The national pilot program was modeled after our very own Safety Circuit Rider Program, created by Iowans for Iowans almost 20 years ago. ■