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APNewsBreak: Police seek help on drugged driving

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ALBANY, N.Y. — The federal government should help police departments nationwide obtain the tools and training needed to attack a rising scourge of driving under the influence, two U.S. senators said Sunday.

Sens. Charles Schumer of New York and Mark Pryor of Arkansas proposed that federal funding in a pending transportation funding bill be used for research and to train police. They said police have no equipment and few have training in identifying drugged drivers, who don't show the same outward signs of intoxication as drunken drivers do, such as slurred speech.

"Cops need a Breathalyzer-like technology that works to identify drug-impaired drivers on-the-spot — before they cause irreparable harm," Schumer said. "With the explosive growth of prescription drug abuse it's vital that local law enforcement have the tools and training they need to identify those driving under the influence of narcotics to get them off the road."

Drugged driving arrests have risen 35 percent in New York since 2001, Schumer said. He said that's a fraction of the cases.

The Democrats cited a 2009 federal report in which 10.5 million Americans acknowledged that they had driven under the influence of drugs. Schumer said the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that in a 2007 roadside survey, more than 16 percent of weekend and night-time drivers tested positive for illegal prescription drugs or over-the-counter drugs. Eleven percent of them were found to have taken illegal drugs.

The administration also found that a third of 12,055 drivers tested who died in car crashes in 2009 had used drugs.

Yet police have no approved equipment to help identify drugged drivers, though saliva tests are being researched.

Pryor wants to create federal grants so police can participate in programs that require up to 200 hours of instruction to detect drugged driving as well as to better detect drunken driving.

Schumer said the effort is prompted in part by two fatal December crashes in the New York City area in which two boys — one 5 years old and the other, 4 — died. Prescription drug abuse is being investigated in both cases.

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