

Criminals face tougher laws in Texas

■ Area police officers updated on changes

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Laws on some criminal offenses such as drunken driving, injuring a disabled person and forgery against elderly people are getting stiffer in Texas, some 200 Fort Bend-area peace officers learned in training Sept. 10.

The gathering drew officers from various police agencies as well as the Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office who got an update on changes in the law made by the state Legislature. This was the sixth biannual event, said District Attorney John Healey, who organized the workshop with Sheriff Milton Wright.

"Every two years, the Legislature makes some changes and additions to our laws. Prosecutors and police officers must keep abreast of these changes," Healey said. "This is one of several courses that area law enforcement officers may attend in order to comply with licensing requirements."

The daylong workshop conducted by prosecutors from Healey's office highlighted several tougher revisions to existing laws.

Abuse of disabled

One change escalated the penalty from a third-degree felony to a second-degree felony for an employee of a state-supported living center who knowingly causes bodily injury to a disabled person under the employee's care. The offender faces up to 20 years in jail and up to a \$10,000 fine.

In another change, if a forgery is committed against

an elderly person, the punishment is meted out from a one-step-higher category, including a Class A misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$4,000 fine.

Drunken driving

Also, there has been an expansion in the circumstances in which a peace officer can require a drunken driver to give a blood sample without a search warrant.

Under the new law, after arresting a person for driving while intoxicated, an officer can transport that driver to a hospital and, without the intervention of a magistrate, can have the driver's blood draws in the following three scenarios:

- If an accident has occurred and someone other than the driver is injured and has been taken to a medical facility for treatment.

- Or the driver was transporting a child younger than 15.

- Or the officer receives reliable information that the driver had twice previously been convicted of DWI.

The training, originally planned at the sheriff's office meeting hall that accommodates a maximum of 125 people, had to be moved to Safari Texas Ranch, an event facility on FM 1464 in north Fort Bend County, due to an unexpected surge in the number of officers registered. Traditionally the number stood at around 100, Healey said.

Healey attributed the increase in the number of participants to a new state mandate that took effect on Sept. 1 that requires all Texas peace officers to receive training in the Legislature's change in laws.