

Driving Minnesota Toward Zero Deaths?

Agencies Aim High for Low Traffic Fatality Rate

In recent years, Minnesota has averaged about 600 traffic fatalities annually. However, there have been recent signs of progress as both 2004 and 2005 saw fewer deaths—with 567 and 562 people killed, respectively.

To reverse the road death epidemic, the Toward Zero Deaths (TZD) program was launched in 2004 to reduce traffic crashes through locally developed solutions.

Today, TZD is a multi-agency partnership led by the Minnesota departments of Public Safety, Health and Transportation, with partners including the State Patrol, Federal Highway Administration, county engineers and the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota.

The TZD program acknowledges that each community is unique and encourages local coalitions to partner with state agencies to tailor solutions specific to their traffic issues and resources. Generating participation in greater Minnesota is especially critical as 70 percent of traffic fatalities occur on rural roads.

Four “E”s Allow Local Solutions

The best solution to local traffic problems often requires a combination of strategies. TZD focuses on four strategic areas to reduce crashes, also known as the Four “E”s—enforcement, engineering, emergency trauma care and education.

- Enforcement represents specially funded law enforcement patrols targeting seat belt use, impaired driving and speeding motorists.

- Engineering evaluates roadway design and safer roads are realized through improvements such as median barriers which prevent cross-median crashes.
- Emergency trauma care represents pre-hospital and hospital providers working to assure crash victims are promptly transported and treated at facilities appropriate to severity of their injuries.
- Education includes providing material and supporting training programs for groups such as teen and older drivers, and using marketing campaigns targeting driver behavior.

Several communities have TZD coalitions targeting specific road corridors: Hwy. 55 in Wright County (from Buffalo to Medina), Hwy. 52 between Rochester and the Twin Cities, and the Hwys. 65/95 corridor in Mille Lacs and Isanti counties.

Every Driver, Passenger Has a Role

Every driver and passenger can reduce road fatalities, says Kathy Swanson, director of the state’s Office of Traffic Safety.

“Nearly all crashes are the result of driver behavior. Fatalities would drop if everyone would buckle up, drive sober, drive at safe speeds and pay attention.”

As to if zero traffic deaths is a realistic goal, Swanson replies, “The emphasis is on ‘toward’ — progress through reduction. If not zero, what number of deaths is acceptable?”

For more information on how individuals and organizations can address local traffic issues, visit www.tzd.state.mn.us.