



NEWS RELEASE

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2008 MINNESOTA TRAFFIC DEATHS PROJECTED TO BE LOWEST SINCE 1944

ST. PAUL — The preliminary 2008 state traffic death count of 424 represents a dramatic 16 percent decrease in deaths from 2007, and the lowest fatality mark since 1944 when 356 motorists were killed. The 2008 death tally will rise as more fatal reports are received by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS) — the final number will be available in May. The 2007 road fatality total was 510.

DPS officials say increased seat belt use, as well as proactive approaches such as enhanced impaired and aggressive driving patrols, road safety improvements, as well as emergency medical services efforts contributed to the lower death count. Traffic safety officials nationwide believe higher gas prices also factored in the drop in deaths observed across the country, but as yet unknown to what extent. Officials say the spike in gas prices led motorists to travel less and at safer speeds.

“There is a clearer trend of lower annual road death counts,” says Michael Campion, DPS commissioner. “But motorists can’t afford to have a false sense of security behind the wheel, everyone must continue safe driving habits — and step one is seat belt use.” Campion adds that the most critical stat to determine the safety of state roads is the traffic death rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT), which will be available later in 2009. In 2007, the state VMT fatality rate was less than one person (0.89) — among the lowest in the nation — and down from a rate of 5.52 in 1966.

The preliminary 2008 traffic death total reflects 306 vehicle occupants of which at least 126 were not wearing seat belts. The deaths also include 68 motorcyclists — up from 61 in 2007; and 12 bicyclist deaths — up from four in 2007. Other deaths included pedestrians (25), ATV operators (6), school bus passengers (4), other bus passengers (1), snowmobilers (1) and other (1).

The preliminary DWI arrest count is 34,072, and this figure will continue to grow. Crash data regarding alcohol-related deaths will be reported later this year. Each year, impaired driving accounts for around 200 deaths and 3,000 serious injuries.

DPS reports distraction, impaired driving, seat belt non-use and speeding are expected to be the primary contributing factors of the 2008 fatal crashes.

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Several statewide enforcement efforts in 2008 yielded dramatic results. An April speed campaign generated 24,000 citations. Enhanced seat belt enforcement campaigns in May and October resulted in more than 12,500 belt citations, and officers participating in a statewide July DWI enforcement campaign arrested more than 3,200 motorists for DWI. Year-long NightCAP (nighttime concentrated alcohol patrol) DWI enforcement efforts that target the deadliest counties for impaired driving netted more than 3,000 DWIs. The results of a December-long DWI crackdown will be available later this week.

The state's traffic safety efforts are anchored by the *Toward Zero Deaths* (TZD) program. TZD is an interagency partnership led by the departments of Public Safety, Transportation and Health, in cooperation with state and local law enforcement, the Federal Highway Administration, Minnesota County Engineers Association, and the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota. TZD encourages traffic safety community stakeholders such as law enforcement, engineers, emergency medical technicians and educators/communication professionals to partner with the state to tailor solutions specific to their local traffic safety needs. TZD focuses on the application of four strategic areas to reduce crashes — education, enforcement, engineering and emergency medical strategies. The goal of TZD is 400 or fewer fatalities by 2010.