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NEWS RELEASE

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FINAL TRAFFIC CRASH REPORT: MINNESOTA DEATHS DOWN 11 PERCENT

*Alcohol-Related Deaths Lowest Ever, Motorcyclist Fatalities
Continue to Rise, Teen Deaths Drop Again*

ST. PAUL — There were 455 traffic deaths on Minnesota roads in 2008, the lowest on record since 1945 and an 11 percent drop from the 510 deaths in 2007. The Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS) annual detailed summary of traffic crashes, Minnesota Motor Vehicle Crash Facts 2008 is online at www.dps.state.mn.us/ots, click on “Crash Data and Reports.”

Crash Facts reports that while the state recorded the lowest number of alcohol-related traffic deaths ever (163), alcohol-related crashes still accounted for 36 percent of all fatalities — typical for each year. Crash Facts also spotlights the 72 motorcyclist fatalities, representing 16 percent of all traffic deaths and the biggest rider death count since 1985. Conversely, teenagers (16–19) continue their decline in deaths — in 2008 there were 31 teen deaths, down from 41 in 2007. A new, stronger teen graduated driver’s licensing law and a ban on texting/emailing/web access will help to continue this trend, according to DPS.

DPS officials acknowledge that an up tick in unemployment and high gas prices were partial reasons for the low 2008 death count. Gas prices caused motorists to drive at slower, safer speeds, and unemployment rates likely factored in a slight but not significant drop in vehicle miles traveled. The Minnesota Department of Transportation reports 57.3 billion vehicle miles traveled (VMT) on Minnesota roads last year — just lower than the 57.4 billion in 2007. The 2008 fatality rate per 100 million VMT is less than one person (0.79) — among the lowest in the nation.

Cheri Marti, DPS director of the Office of Traffic Safety adds that proactive efforts through the state's Toward Zero Deaths platform played a role in the drop in deaths. She cites enhanced enforcement campaigns are effective by targeting belt use, speeding and impaired driving. Marti says educational outreach efforts in communities are helping to communicate important messages; while engineering enhancements such as cable median barriers are preventing crashes. She also says that improved emergency response strategies are working to increase the chances of survival for crash victims, especially in rural communities.

Marti says that driver behavior is a true factor in limiting traffic deaths and notes that a slight increase in distracted/inattentive driving-related crashes and speed-related crashes prevented a deeper decline in fatalities in 2008. And, while the state's seat belt compliance rate (87 percent) is strong, only 45 percent of motorist fatalities were belted. DPS expects the belt compliance rate to further increase — and unbelted deaths to decline — as the state passed a primary seat belt law in the spring of 2009. The new booster seat law will also limit child tragedies.

“Minnesota can continue the positive trend of preventing traffic deaths if all motorists continue to put their absolute focus toward driving and practice common sense safety habits,” says Marti. “On a state level, we try to influence a safe driving environment through better enforcement, improved engineering, constant education and efficient emergency trauma response, which are the anchoring components of the Toward Zero Deaths program.”

To-date in 2009, there are 212 traffic deaths compared to 208 at this time last year.

Minnesota Motor Vehicle Crash Facts details crashes by vehicle type, contributing factors, driver age and gender, and occurrence of crashes by county, as well as cities with populations of 2,500 or more.

Crash Facts 2008 reports 79,095 crashes and 33,379 injuries — 1,553 severe. The 455 fatalities reflect the deaths of motorists (325); motorcyclists (72); pedestrians (25); bicyclists (13); ATV riders (10); school bus occupants (4); snowmobilers (1); and other (5 — golf cart, commercial bus, personal conveyance vehicle (3)).

The most common factors in all 2008 crashes are, in order of frequency, driver inattention or distraction, failure to yield right-of-way, and illegal or unsafe speed.

Annual traffic deaths have significantly dropped in comparison to death figures from earlier in the decade. In 2000 there were 625 deaths; 2001 — 568; 2002 — 657; 2003 — 655; 2004 — 567; 2005 — 559; 2006 — 494; 2007 — 510; 2008 — 455.

Bicyclists

The 13 biker deaths in 2008 is the highest fatal count since 2000, when 14 were killed. Marti says high gas prices likely forced more commuters to biking in 2008, resulting in more deaths. She expects a similar influx of bicyclists this year and urges caution for those who may be new to bicycle commuting — wear a helmet, reflective gear and obey traffic signals and signs.

Impaired Driving

The 163 alcohol-related deaths in 2008 is an all-time low. Despite this news, Marti says impaired driving is still a factor in more than one-third of all deaths — which is consistent each year. She urges everyone to plan for a safe and sober ride to avoid drinking and driving. Last year, 35,736 motorists were arrested for DWI, which is about average for a year. One in eight Minnesota drivers has a DWI.

Motorcycles

In 2008, rider deaths spiked 18 percent from 2007 — 72 motorcyclists were killed, the highest death count in 24 years. This fatal count represents 16 percent of all traffic deaths, alarming considering motorcycles represent just 5 percent of all registered vehicles. Marti says ridership is at an all time high and the trend of rider deaths underscores the need for rider training, the use of protective gear and for motorists to be aware of riders. Male riders ages 40–49 accounted for 24 percent of the rider fatalities.

Pedestrians

There were 25 pedestrian deaths, down from 33 in 2007. Pedestrian injuries also decreased by 11 percent from 2007. Marti reminds pedestrians to cross where it's safe —

not where it's convenient — and asks motorists to be alert for pedestrians and anticipate those crossing illegally.

Seat Belts

Of the 325 vehicle occupants killed, 147 were belted — more than half were not and of those 64 percent were ejected. During nighttime hours, (9 p.m. – 3 a.m.), only 24 of the 85 (28 percent) motorists killed were belted. Of the impaired drivers killed, only 22 percent were belted. Marti says it is critical motorists speak up to insist every passenger is belted to ensure a safe trip and avoid being stopped and ticketed.

Teens

There were 31 teenage deaths (16–19) in 2008, a drop from 41 deaths in 2007 and down from 65 in 2006. Marti notes strong laws will continue to limit teen deaths and help create safer teen drivers. She encourages parents continue to monitor and train their teen drivers, even after licensure.

Where Are the Crashes

Geographically, 136 deaths (30 percent) occurred in the Twin Cities' seven-county metro (55 percent of the state's population), while 319 deaths (70 percent) occurred in the 80 counties of greater Minnesota.

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