



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **MINNESOTA'S ANNUAL TRAFFIC DEATHS DROP AGAIN; 2009 FIGURE PROJECTED TO BE LOWEST SINCE 1944**

*Primary Belt Law a Factor; Motorcycle Deaths Decline by 29 Percent*

ST. PAUL — While 2010 had a deadly start with four deaths this past weekend, Minnesota's 2009 preliminary traffic death count of 403 marks another significant drop in annual road fatalities, representing an 8 percent drop from the 455 deaths in 2008. The state projects a final death number of around 420, which would be the fewest number of fatalities since 356 were reported in 1944. The 2009 traffic death number will rise as more fatal reports are received by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS), the final number will be available early this summer.

The most critical stat to determine road safety is the death rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT). DPS estimates the 2009 VMT will be 0.75, which would be the lowest ever for Minnesota. In 2008, the state VMT fatality rate was less than one person (0.79) — among the lowest in the nation — and down from a rate of 5.52 in 1966.

DPS officials cite the primary seat belt law as one likely factor for the decline in deaths as it helped to boost the state's seat belt compliance rate to a record-high 90 percent. The new belt law requires drivers and all passengers to be belted or in the correct child restraint. Belt use of many of the 2009 vehicle occupants remain unknown at this time, but preliminary reports last fall did show that the number of unbelted deaths had dropped, reflecting increased belt use.

Heightened enforcement efforts also supported the decline in deaths, according to DPS. New enforcement tactics such as "high-visibility" DWI patrols employ corridor-specific saturations and electronic signage to help motorists recognize intense enforcement. During the year, multiple statewide and county-specific enforcement campaigns were coupled with public education and outreach. These efforts focus on impaired driving, seat belt non-use and speeding.

MnDOT road engineering improvements in recent years have contributed to fewer traffic deaths. Cost-effective measures include cable median barriers that help to prevent cross-median crashes, and rumble strips along shoulders of roads have proved life-saving by alerting motorists that they are close to moving off the roadway.

DPS says the economy remains a factor in the declining deaths, likely causing motorists to drive at slower, safer speeds to conserve fuel, and there are fewer motorists on the road.

While legislation, enforcement, education, engineering and the economy all factored in the decline in deaths, DPS Commissioner Michael Campion says ultimately, sustaining a trend of fewer traffic deaths comes down to drivers making safe, smart decisions behind the wheel.

"The ongoing drive to fewer traffic deaths needs to be a comprehensive effort including law enforcement, engineers, emergency responders, and most importantly, Minnesota motorists," says Campion. "We can continue to prevent needless road deaths and serious injuries as long as we don't get complacent behind the wheel."

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The 403 fatality count includes motorists (298), motorcyclists (51); pedestrians (36); bicyclists (9); ATV riders (3); farm equipment operators (3); commercial bus passengers/drivers (2), and a road maintenance vehicle occupant. Campion says distraction, impaired driving, seat belt non-use and speeding are expected to be the primary contributing factors of the 2009 fatal crashes serious injuries.

The preliminary 51 motorcyclist deaths represent a sharp decline (29 percent) from 72 rider deaths in 2008, which was a 24-year high. The drop in rider deaths is significant as ridership is at an all-time high.

Cheri Marti, director of DPS Office of Traffic Safety says motorcyclist enforcement efforts and patrols on Twin Cities roads with high-motorcycle crash involvement factored in the drop. "Rider training was also critical as were campaigns to educate motorists to wear high-visibility riding gear," says Marti. "We also continued to conduct targeted awareness campaigns in the deadliest counties for rider deaths."

The preliminary DWI arrest count is 28,540 but will grow as alcohol-concentration data is finalized. Crash data regarding alcohol-related deaths will be reported later this year. Each year, impaired driving accounts for up to 200 deaths and 400 serious injuries. Last year there were 163 alcohol-related deaths, the lowest death count on record yet still representing one-third of all annual fatalities.

While bicycle and motorcycle deaths declined in 2009, pedestrian deaths (36) topped the 2008 mark of 25. This figure is below the decade's average of around 40 deaths each year, but Marti says the jump in deaths is an alert for motorists to pay attention for pedestrians and stop for crossing pedestrians both at marked crosswalks and all street corners which are unmarked crosswalks. "Motorists must treat every corner like a crosswalk," she says.

During the decade, the state's annual traffic deaths steadily declined: in 2000 there were 625 deaths; 2001 — 568; 2002 — 657; 2003 — 655; 2004 — 567; 2005 — 559; 2006 — 494; 2007 — 510; 2008 — 455.

Campion says other 2009 legislation were vital for traffic safety. In July, the child passenger safety law was strengthened to require booster seat use. Children cannot ride in a seat belt alone until they are age 8 or 4 feet 9 inches tall, whichever comes first. Boosters lift a child so a belt fits properly. Also in July, a statewide ignition interlock pilot program began to reduce repeat DWI offenses. The program allows certain DWI offenders to regain driving privileges by having an ignition interlock device installed in their vehicles so they can drive safely, legally and continue to work and attend treatment. The program will expire June 30, 2011.

The preliminary 2009 fatality number demonstrates the state is nearing its goal of 400 or fewer deaths by 2010. Safety officials say Minnesota's cornerstone traffic safety initiative, *Toward Zero Deaths (TZD)*, has been a key to reducing deaths and injuries. *TZD* is a multidisciplinary 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 facilitated by the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota. *TZD* encourages traffic safety community stakeholders such as law enforcement, engineers, emergency medical technicians, safety advocates 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 trauma care.

**Driving Minnesota Toward Zero Deaths.**

**Editor's Note:** For preliminary traffic deaths by county, visit [www.dps.state.mn.us/ots](http://www.dps.state.mn.us/ots).