



NEWS RELEASE

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TAKE ACTION TO STOP DISTRACTION BEHIND THE WHEEL

Public Safety Launches Enforcement, Education Campaign to Stop Distracted Driving

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ST. PAUL — Attention drivers! Around 100 law enforcement agencies are conducting a distracted driving educational push coupled with an enforcement effort during the first week of August. Agencies will increase patrols on Aug. 5 during Gov. Pawlenty's proclaimed "Distraction Free Driving Day."

The effort is coordinated by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS) Office of Traffic Safety. The event launch coincides with results from a AAA/*Seventeen* survey released today that shows nearly nine in 10 teenage drivers have engaged in a distracted driving behavior, such as texting or talking on a cell phone — although most of them know their actions increase their risk of crashing.

Driver distraction is a leading factor in crashes in Minnesota, accounting for at least 25 percent of all crashes annually, resulting in at least 70 deaths and 350 injuries. DPS reports these numbers are vastly underreported due to officers' challenges to determine "distraction" as a contributing crash factor.

The campaign address all distractions behind the wheel, beyond cell phone use and texting, according to Cheri Marti, director of the Office of Traffic Safety.

"Inattentive driving includes a range of distractions, from daydreaming to reaching for items to changing music," says Marti. "Our intent is to educate motorists that when you're behind the wheel, your focus needs to be on the road."

In 2008, it became illegal in Minnesota for drivers to read or compose texts/emails, and access the Web on a wireless device while the vehicle is in motion or a part of traffic, such as at a stoplight. It is also illegal for drivers under age 18 to use a cell phone at any time. There are other distracted driving laws that address a driver's duty "to drive with due care."

There are four main types of driver distraction:

- Visual — looking away from the road.
- Mechanical/Physical — taking hands off the wheel: manipulation of controls, such as dialing a cell phone or adjusting radio or music device.
- Cognitive — being "lost in thought," or focusing on a conversation, resulting in withdrawing from situational awareness.
- Combination of the above — reading a map or texting while driving.

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DPS reports distractions cause drivers to react more slowly to traffic conditions, such as a vehicle stopping or pulling out in traffic. A University of Utah study reports that using a cell phone while driving, whether hands-free or hand-held, delays a driver's reactions as much as having an alcohol-concentration level of 0.08 percent. And, drivers take their eyes off the road for up to 4.6 out of every 6 seconds when texting — equivalent to traveling the length of a football field at 55 mph hours without looking up.

DPS offers these tips to minimize distractions:

- Cell phones — turn off cell phones, or place them out of reach to avoid the urge to dial or answer. If a passenger is present, ask them to handle calls/texts.
- Music and other controls — pre-program favorite radio stations for easy access and arrange music (mp3 player/CDs/tapes) in an easy-to-access spot. Adjust mirrors and heat/AC before traveling, or ask a passenger to assist.
- Navigation — designate a passenger to serve as a co-pilot to help with directions. If driving alone, map out destinations in advance, and pull over to study a map.
- Eating and drinking — if you cannot avoid food/beverage, at least avoid messy foods, and be sure food and drinks are secured.
- Children — teach children the importance of good behavior in a vehicle; do not underestimate how distracting it can be to tend to children while driving.
- If you're a passenger, speak up to stop drivers from distracted driving behavior.

“No matter how routine driving may seem, the driving environment changes constantly and you need to be focused in order to react,” says Marti. “Take driving seriously. When driving, don't use time in the driver's seat to conduct other, less necessary business.”

The enforcement and education effort is a component of the state's *Toward Zero Deaths (TZD)* traffic safety program. *TZD* is the state's core traffic safety program that uses a multidisciplinary approach to address traffic issues regionally through enforcement, education, engineering and emergency trauma care. The goal of the *TZD* is 400 or fewer road deaths by 2010. The current preliminary death count in Minnesota is 218.

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