

Dangers of distracted driving demonstrated

By Rachel H. Goldman

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Hundreds of Kennebunk High School students last week faced a video screen, grabbed a steering wheel and navigated through the dire consequences that come from one simple decision.

The technology is part of Maine Bureau of Highway Safety's portable driving simulator, One Simple Decision, that Kennebunk Police School Resource Officer Mark Carney last week set up near the school gym for students to use.

The program demonstrates the dangers of impaired and distracted driving.

Students sit at a steering wheel with their feet on gas and brake pedals and navigate through a simulated course on the video screen. Students choose to experience either impaired driving, where they drive with simulated effects of delayed reaction time and poor coordination, or distracted driving, where they drive while sending text messages.

The machine also simulates the legal and medical repercussions of impaired and distracted driving.

Robert Annese, law enforcement liaison for the Maine Bureau of Highway Safety, purchased the simulators with grants from the American Automobile Association and Ford Motor Co. He said the simulators' emphasis on real-world consequences attracted him to the One Simple Decision model.

Drivers who use the simulation may be pulled over or cause a fatal accident, in which case they find themselves looking into the eyes of a police officer, looking up as if from a gurney as a medical team works to find vital signs or sitting across from a judge as she orders a sentence.

"The consequences part of the program really sold me," Annese said. "One that I really like kids to see is the one where they go and try to get a job. That's where they really learn the long-term consequences of their actions because they may want a part-time job driving for Domino's (Pizza) but, well I'm sorry if you've got impaired driving on your record that's not going to happen."

Annese said acquiring the simulators is well-timed.

He said the bureau has seen a substantial increase in the number of drivers operating under the influence of prescription and non-prescription drugs.

“It’s like an epidemic,” he said, adding that the impaired driving course simulated the effects not only of alcohol use but also of drug use.

The summer acquisition of the program also coincides with Maine’s new law regarding cell phone use that took effect Sept. 28. The law bans drivers from reading and writing text messages and e-mail on cell phones or any portable electronic device while behind the wheel and carries a fine of at least \$135.

Carney in August attended Maine Bureau of Highway Safety’s Dare to Prepare seminar. The seminar trained him to give 90-minute pre-permit presentations and to use the simulator with young drivers.

Carney said the seminar was invaluable and he was especially excited to reach out to students through the technology.

“The reason I like this is because teens today respond better to technology. It helps it click,” he said.

He said students also benefited from using the simulator while crowds of their peers look on.

“It really feels like a car load of kids here when they drive the course. There’s lots of noise all around them,” he said.

Carney also played for students the AT&T video “The Last Text” on a television beside the simulator. Carney said the video, a series of stories of teenagers who died in car accidents while sending a text message, shows how “senseless” texting while driving is.

He also handed out copies of the new texting while driving law.

Annese said the distracted driving simulation is especially powerful.

While the impaired driving course simulates the effects of drugs and alcohol, in the distracted driving program students experience the challenges of navigating while writing a real text message.

Carney called the distracted driving course “more literal.”

Annese said he hopes offering the two courses reinforces the danger of texting.

“Alcohol and automobile accidents have been killing teens for years, but we’re trying to get the word out about the dangers of texting,” he said.

“Texting is certainly an issue today,” Carney said. “The percentage of kids who own a cell phone is very high. Texting while driving is a temptation and kids need to understand how important it is to resist it. I tell people put the phone in your bag and leave it there and don’t use it until you reach your destination. It’s the safest choice.”

Carney said student feedback on the simulator was “great.”

“Everyone that walks by wants to use it and I can tell that the simulation really makes them think,” he said.

Kennebunk High School junior Corey Driscoll, who has his driving permit and plans to test for his license next year, said the simulation brought to life the dangers of texting.

“I don’t text while I drive now, but this definitely makes you see why you shouldn’t be doing it,” he said.

Driscoll said the simulation reinforced what driver education classes teach about the perils of distracted driving.

Annese said schools throughout the state are eager to borrow the simulator.

“The program has exceeded my expectations,” he said. “We’re about to do our fourth training session for police and resource officers with more to come and we have schools lined up throughout the fall and winter to borrow the simulator.”

“It’s very popular,” he added. “Thank goodness we got two.”