

Distracted driving can prove costly: Rochester students have chance to see consequences in driver simulator

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ROCHESTER — Spaulding High School Junior Chris Terry was at the wheel, and turning up a slipway onto the highway, when his vehicle clipped a concrete barrier, because a minor distraction had caused him to speed.

"Wow! A \$384 fine! Worse consequences than I thought," Terry grinned, turning round from the screen of his distracted driver simulator that had been set up by Rochester Police Department in a corner of Spaulding High School cafeteria.

On March 21 and 22, from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., the RPD's Traffic Safety Coordinator, Officer Jamey Balint, was supervising and advising students who were lined up to see if they could negotiate a simulated ride that incorporated numerous distractions, including cell phone and texting. Most students came to theoretical unhappy ends.

"Distracted driving has been identified to be the number one cause of collisions in Rochester, comprising about 25 percent of our total collisions. Last year, the Rochester Police Department investigated 1,001 reported collisions. This means that roughly 250 of those collisions were a result of a distracted driver," said Balint. "We can safely assume that this number is even greater since other factors, such as yellow line and failure to yield violations are often times the result of a driver being distracted, whether it be from eating food, changing the radio station, plugging in a portable music player or speaking/texting on a cell phone."



John Nolan/Times photo Spaulding High School junior Chris Terry, seated at the distracted driver simulator set up by Rochester Police Department, has just been asked, on screen, to dial a telephone number while driving.



John Nolan/Times photo Spaulding freshman CJ Lunny is instructed by Traffic Safety Coordinator Officer Jamey Balint on how to operate the controls of the distracted driver simulator.

The two distracted driver simulators set up in the cafeteria were loaned to Rochester Police Department for two days by the Injury Prevention Center at Dartmouth.

"Their whole purpose is to make the general public aware of distracted driving," said Balint.

At Spaulding, after Balint had explained the driving controls contained in the steering column and on the floor, a student would don headphones, and embark on a simulated journey that unfolded on a wide video screen. The student at the wheel would have to deal with regular distracting requests from the "passenger" who would make requests, via the headphones, to make texts or cell phone calls, while, on the screen, deer crossed the road and balls bounced out from the sidewalk.

"It was kind of like the real thing," said Terry, who is currently taking driver's ed.

While a handful of students exercised enough caution to complete the route without crashing or collecting a citation, others became embroiled in accidents, which, if severe enough, involved simulated helicopter airlifts to medical centers. Those students were then alerted to the estimated cost of their misadventures — fines, vehicle repairs, medical bills and more.

"The cost of vehicle repair surprises most people. It can be \$2,000 for an air bag going off," said Balint.

On the first day, with both simulators working, about 30 students were able to use the distracted driver simulators, while scores more looked on.

On day two, one of the units went down, so only 20 students got to experience the simulators.

"We had lines at all four lunches," said Balint. "We had to turn some kids away."

A couple of the students who used the simulator were dismissive. One, after getting a simulated ticket for simulated speeding, tossed his Distracted Driving pamphlet in the trash in a show of bravado.

"The majority were very receptive. After one trip a student said 'I won't be texting or using the cell phone while driving.' If we can prevent one crash it is worth it," said Balint.

"Collisions occur very quickly, making any decision that a driver makes regarding where his/her attention is focused, extremely important. The average person has a perception/reaction time of

1.5 seconds. This means that the driver must perceive a threat, make a decision how to react and then react to a situation. This time is greatly increased when the operator's attention is focused elsewhere," Balint said in a recent traffic safety article.

The next program Balint will conduct at the high school will be on April 10 with the 2012 NH Seatbelt Challenge that is being sponsored by the Buckle Up New Hampshire Coalition. Three groups of students are practicing for the physical challenge involved and will be learning the material required for the educational aspect of the event," said Balint.

The group with the best time will advance to the state finals in Concord, scheduled for May 9.

Before this, on April 24, the 2012 NH Highway Safety Agency Traffic Safety Conference, which is attended by state representative, driver's ed instructors, law enforcement and others with an interest in traffic safety, will be held in Meredith. It is an all-day event, and in the afternoon, a selection of students from the group participating in the Spaulding High School Seatbelt Challenge have been asked to make a presentation.

"It will be our core block of students," said Balint, who explained that this trained group have been peer counseling others on the need for seat belt use and the dangers of distracted driving.

These students have statistics to share, based on seat belt use surveys they have conducted with students and staff in the school parking lots.

To continue their work, and provide money for materials, the Allstate Foundation recently awarded them a grant of \$1,200.

"We will be continuing our efforts to develop safe youthful drivers throughout the school year. We ask that parents and adult leaders help us by serving as good role models to our youth by wearing your seat belts and by not driving while distracted. Help us to save a life. The life saved may be yours or your child's," said Balint.