

New program will address teen driving practices

An alarming number of traffic deaths involving young motorists last year in Stark County has sparked the creation of a driver safety education program that will be presented to area students in 2012.

The Ohio Highway Patrol's Canton Post and Stark County SAFE Communities are collaborating on the new program called Drive Talk.

Sixty percent of the 32 people who died on area roadways in 2011 were under the age of 25 and 12 were teenagers, according to SAFE communities. Two of the young crash victims were pedestrians. The 32 fatalities were two fewer than 2010.



“There was a significant number of juveniles involved,” said Highway Patrol Lt. William Weirtz. “That was a new trend last year.”

In addition to local students, officials are hoping to make the free program available to first-time teen driving offenders who are ordered to appear in Family Court. Officials also are discussing the creation of an advisory board of local students that would meet quarterly with SAFE communities to discuss traffic trends, according to Weirtz.

“We want to present some facts to the teen offenders and make it an open forum for discussion,” Weirtz said. “(But) we don’t want to only limit it to teen offenders. We also want to make it available to any school. It is in the works. We hope to get it started early in the first quarter ... One of the big issues we will be addressing is distracted driving, including texting while driving.”

Sharon George, SAFE Communities coordinator, said the traffic safety advocacy group has been awarded a \$10,000 grant from State Farm Insurance to buy a simulator that warns teens about the dangers of distracted driving.

“We’re real excited about it,” George said. “It’s like a video game. You need to react to what is happening on the screen.”

Three pedestrians, six passengers, 14 drivers, seven motorcyclists, one bicyclist and one all-terrain vehicle rider died in traffic incidents in 2011. Five of the deaths occurred between Oct. 1 and the end of the year.

Seat belts were used in only seven, or 35 percent, of the fatal crashes and safety helmets were worn in only one of the nine incidents where they were applicable.

More than half of last year’s traffic deaths were alcohol or drug-related. The average blood alcohol level was nearly double Ohio’s legal limit of 0.08 percent, including several cases in which drivers were more than three times the legal limit, SAFE Communities reported.

Efforts to address drunken driving are ongoing, said Weirtz, who noted the Highway Patrol this week rolled out a new OVI tax squad, composed of one sergeant and two troopers, that focuses on impaired drivers. The officers are assigned to work Wednesday through Saturday from 6 p.m. to 4 a.m., Weirtz said.

Weirtz said changes also are in store for the county's OVI Task Force, which includes officers from departments such as Massillon, Jackson Township, Perry Township and Canal Fulton. The task force is planning to expand the number of checkpoints this year to 30, Weirtz said. Officers also will conduct checkpoints in multiple locations during the same evening, rather than remaining at a single location.

"In the past, it seems like the way we combated it was through checkpoints and saturation patrols. We're looking at shorter time periods and multiple locations and corridor enforcements on major highways in Stark," Weirtz said.

The University of Akron is compiling data that will be used to determine the locations of checkpoints and patrols operated by the task force, Weirtz said.

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