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Efforts continue to curb distracted driving accidents

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In June 2007, five recent Fairport High School graduates were killed when the SUV they were in crashed into a tractor trailer. The driver's cellphone had been in use moments before the accident.

In April 2010, a SUNY Geneseo student was killed when she went off the road, flipping her car. Authorities believe she was texting at the time.

And earlier this year a truck driver was sentenced to 1 to 4 years in prison for the June 2017 crash that killed a University at Buffalo professor from Rochester. The 28-year-old truck driver was driving 70 mph and using a cellphone when he rear ended the other vehicle.

Despite laws regulating the use of hand-held electronic devices while driving, cellphone use continues to rank among the top driving distractions. One way in which to decrease the use of electronics while driving is to put forth a national effort, said Gene Beresin, a consultant for Liberty Mutual Insurance and executive director of the Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital.

"Driving under the influence has been a major national effort; it hasn't been solved, but it's diminished," Beresin said.

In 2017, Beresin noted, the state of Washington passed the Driving Under the Influence of Electronics Act. As part of the state's Target Zero goal, which strives to end traffic deaths and serious injuries in Washington by 2030, troopers are on the lookout for distracted drivers each day.

"It's kind of a pioneering move, because what was found was one of the reasons for the diminishing amounts of texting (while driving) is fines," Beresin said.

In New York it is illegal to talk on a handheld mobile phone; compose, send or read electronic data; view or take photos; or play games on a portable electronic device. Fines for a first offense range from \$50 to \$200, while a second offense within 18 months would cost up to \$250. A third offense carries a \$50 to \$450 fine.

But there is little evidence to indicate that New York's fines are working: The Institute for Traffic Safety Management and Research, or ITSMR, at the University at Albany's Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy reports that the number of crashes in 2016 that resulted from driver inattention or distraction was 51,630. That increased to 57,006 last year and so far this year distraction have caused 52,789 crashes statewide.

Handheld cellphone use resulted in 731 crashes in 2016, 753 in 2017 and 579 so far this year. Driver distraction across nine factors ranging from cellphone use to eating to passenger distraction resulted in 53,664 accidents in 2016, 59,126 in 2017 and 60,764 so far in 2018.

Distracted driving has resulted in roughly 74 deaths statewide this year, ITSMR reported, and nationwide, nine people are killed each day as a result of distracted driving, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports.

It's commonly believed that teens are the biggest offenders of distracted driving. A recent report in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that overall, 38 percent of high school students who drove in 35 states engaged in texting while driving on at least one day during the 30 day period leading up to the survey; 16 percent engaged in texting while driving on more than 10 days during that

period. But a Liberty Mutual study found that parents of teens often do not lead by example.

"The use of phones for apps, texts, phone calls and notifications that pop up on the phone are all distracting, and it's true for both teens and for parents," Beresin said. "Thirty-eight percent of teens and 37 percent of parents will use apps while driving. So that has to be dealt with."

And some 47 percent of parents, knowing that their teenagers are driving, will text them or call them on their phone, and 44 percent of teens will respond to the call, Beresin noted.

Half of the respondents, of all ages, to the 2018 state Department of Motor Vehicles Driver Behavior Survey reported that they send or receive text messages while driving and 61 percent reported that they talk on the phone while driving.

So while survey results may vary, the end result remains the same, experts say. And often that involves other motorists, bicyclists and pedestrians. That is particularly important in Rochester as the community strives to become more walkable and bike friendly.

"As a city and community we've been doing a lot around engineering and also around encouragement to get more people to walk and bike, but we haven't really addressed the education component," said Mike Bulger, Healthy Communities project coordinator at Common Ground Health.

Bulger is part of a new initiative, drive2Bbetter, that has developed a public education campaign that would help everyone share the road.

"We've chosen to address driver habits at the start of the campaign because drivers have the most power by virtue of having the big, heavy vehicle traveling at high speeds," Bulger said.

Distracted driving can result in excessive speeds and erratic behavior behind the wheel. Between 2010 and 2017, nearly 4,000 injuries and deaths involving motor vehicles and bicyclists or pedestrians occurred in Rochester, drive2Bbetter reported. The drive2Bbetter campaign seeks to accomplish three things: slow drivers down, encourage them to scan their surroundings and allow enough space for bicyclists.

"Most of the pedestrian crashes, where cars crash into pedestrians, happen when they're in a crosswalk," said Mary Hadley, senior program manager at Causewave Community Partners, one of the partners in the drive2Bbetter campaign. "The data would show that when a pedestrian is struck by a car going 40 mph, nine out of 10 times they will not survive. On the other hand, a pedestrian that is struck by a car going 20 mph, there's a nine in 10 chance they will survive."

Causewave in 2012 started a distracted driving initiative that took a slightly different approach than other campaigns. Rather than focus on calls and texts, the campaign took a pre-emptive approach.

"For some people it's harder to avoid the temptation than for others; they don't have as much power to overcome that temptation," said Aaron Lattanzio, also a senior program manager at Causewave. "So we take a different approach and (strive to) reduce the amount of distractions coming into the car, knowing that the driver is still the end goal. Let's say you're calling a loved one and it's rush hour or the end of the work day and you know that they're probably behind the wheel. Just stop and wait, because the conversation's not that important."

Lattanzio noted that throughout the distracted driving campaign, volunteers every two years will run observational studies of drivers in which they tally visibly distracted drivers. And while that number likely underrepresents the percentage of distracted drivers, it does help guide where the focus should be.

"We've done that every two years and we saw a little decline the first time we did it after campaign launch, and then it plateaued," Lattanzio said. "When cellphones were first brought into our vehicles it was really just calls or texts, but now there's just so many other distractions because we have so many uses for phones."

In addition to the enormous personal costs of accidents resulting from distracted driving, businesses also encounter costs, Lattanzio said. Research estimates that on-the-job accidents cost employers more than \$24,500 per property damage crash, with the cost rising to \$150,000 per injury and to as much as \$3.6 million per fatality.

Isaac Heating & Air Conditioning Inc. President Ray Isaac said his company has a zero tolerance policy toward distracted driving, and in particular cellphone use.

"Initiatives we do as a company is we provide Bluetooth devices for all the people that have mobile devices that were provided by the company," Isaac said. "No. 2 is we don't send mass emails or text messages from the office to the field until after 7 p.m., so we don't inadvertently distract them when they're driving."

GPS helps identify drivers who frequently employ harsh braking, which could be a sign of distraction, and Isaac has a policy in which drivers are not allowed to be holding the phone while they are driving.

"If they're seen doing it, we've suspended people for up to two days," he said.

And Isaac is investing tens of thousands of dollars, he said, in technology to help eliminate cellphone distractions.

"We're installing something called Cellcontrol," Isaac explained. "It's a device that's permanently mounted in the vehicle it has a lifetime battery in it and whoever is driving that vehicle their mobile device has to be registered then it will disable those devices completely when the vehicle is in motion."

Provisions allow the company to enable certain numbers for emergencies, but for the most part, cellphone use is disabled while the vehicle is moving with the Cellcontrol device, Isaac said.

"The most dangerous thing our people do is getting to the job. And it's not just them, it's everyone else out there," Isaac said. "You have to take every reasonable measure to keep something from happening in today's society. You hate to be defensive in nature, but it's a proactive stance."

Added Lattanzio: "They have a really good environment that's helping to address distracted driving with their employees, but they're also making the roadways safer because their drivers are safer."

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