BUSINESSES ARE TAKING THE WHEEL
PROTECTING THEIR WORKERS AND THEIR BOTTOM LINE
HOW ONE COMMUNITY TOOK ON TRAFFIC SAFETY
KEEPING TEENS AND OLDER DRIVERS SAFE ON THE ROAD

WRITTEN BY SUZY FRISCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG BARES
The ROI of Traffic Safety

By Carol Bufton and Randy Williams

Let’s play Jeopardy. Here’s the statement. They kill about 500 Minnesota workers and family members each year, injure 35,000 more, and annually cost the state $1.6 billion.

The answer: What are traffic crashes? And the fact is you jeopardize your employees, their families, your company’s productivity and your bottom line. Traffic crashes are the leading cause of injury deaths on the job (and away from work as well). In fact, the most dangerous part of your employees’ day is the time they spend traveling to and from work.

Those events we call traffic “accidents” cost American employers more than $60 billion each year: These costs can be invisible because they’re spread throughout your budget, in health and workers’ compensation insurance premiums, absenteeism, lost productivity and the cost of retraining or hiring new workers. Work-related crash injuries are the most costly workers’ compensation claim by cause of injury. They’re responsible for up to 40 percent of your employees’ lost work hours, even though most of them happen off the job.

The good news—traffic crashes are not inevitable. You can take steps to reduce your employees’ risk, because accidents don’t just happen—they are predictable and preventable. You can lower insurance costs, reduce absenteeism, increase productivity, and ultimately boost profits by helping employees prevent traffic-related injuries to themselves and their families. In this supplement, you’ll find information to help you more fully understand the threat to your business, and you’ll find tools to help you mitigate it.

We’re asking you to invest 15 minutes in reading the stories in this supplement to learn about the threat of traffic crashes to your employees and your business. Talk about it with business colleagues—and your friends and family. Take action to reduce that threat. The ROI will be worth it; you’ll protect your employees, your business and your bottom line.

AAA, founded more than 100 years ago, offers automotive, travel, insurance and financial services to more than 50 million members in the United States and Canada. The Minnesota Safety Council, founded in 1928, is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit organization focused on making Minnesota a safer place to live by helping prevent unintentional injuries on the job, on the road, at home, and at play. Together, these organizations have almost two centuries of experience in providing traffic safety education and services, as well as providing national leadership on the traffic safety issue.

Colin Brownlow, manager of safety and technical training, CenterPoint Energy

Too High A Price

By Promoting Safety Behind the Wheel, Businesses Stand to Gain in More Ways Than One.

It’s easy to think of car crashes as a personal matter; one that only impacts individuals and their families. Yet the nearly 79,000 collisions last year in Minnesota also put a dent in businesses’ bank accounts. Every time an employee gets into a car crash, it costs them employers an average of $16,500—and up to $500,000 if the collision is fatal, reports the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS).

Arguably, then, employers have a real stake in making sure their workers drive safely, whether they are driving on the job or for personal reasons. After all, car crashes are the number one cause of employee deaths and a significant cause of disabling injuries to employees, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Additionally, the most dangerous part of the workday is the time they spend in their vehicles, including traveling to and from work.

“Companies don’t realize how car crashes affect their bottom line,” says Lisa Kons, traffic safety coordinator for the Minnesota Safety Council and state coordinator of NETS. “If an employee crashes, the company pays for insurance costs, time away from work, property damage, filling the position if the person is out on disability, or killed. All of that ends up costing employers.”

Businesses are starting to pay closer attention to the safety of their employees on the road, especially if their employees drive on the job. They have discovered that simple safety programs, like a seat belt requirement or rules that restrict cell phone use while driving, can do wonders to reduce car crashes, slash business expenses from collisions, and lower insurance premiums.

Training that Works

At CenterPoint Energy in Minneapolis, traffic safety has been a big priority for years. Before an employee is even given the keys to a company vehicle, he or she must complete driver training, including time in the classroom and on the road with a driving instructor. This training is repeated once every three years. Drivers also receive an additional two to three hours of safety training annually via the classroom and video instruction.

“Safety is a core value here, not just for our employees but for the general public as well,” notes Colin Brownlow, manager of safety and technical training at CenterPoint.

“Don’t ever want to be in a situation where one of our vehicles injures one of our customers or anyone else.”

CenterPoint has more than 650 employees who drive daily for the company, with another 300 to 400 workers who get behind the wheel occasionally. Field service workers drive big trucks through tight urban areas, and Home Service Plus employees make six to eight stops a day to fix residential appliances and furnaces. “We drive a tremendous amount—many of our employees are on the road constantly,” Brownlow says. “Their exposure to hazards is tremendous, so we try to give them as many tools as we can.”

The company’s safety training focuses on two main areas: how to avoid backing-up collisions and how to drive safely through intersections—a big danger zone for CenterPoint vehicles. In addition, the
When members of the Minnesota Army National Guard return from serving in Iraq, there are plenty of things to adjust to: being with their families, holding civilian jobs, and living in peaceful surroundings. The road is another place they might need to adapt.

This summer and fall, the Guard has been providing returning veterans with reinteg ration training in regular and motorcycle driving. The military wants to make sure these soldiers modify their habits when they return to Minnesota roads, which have a different set of hazards than those they experienced overseas, says Sgt. First Class Gerard Hummel of the Minnesota Army National Guard’s State Safety Office. “We’re trying to change the behavior of people coming back because they’ve been at a high risk level for the past 21-plus months.”

During their time in Iraq, many members of the Guard conducted road and convoy security, which warranted traveling at high speeds and driving aggressively to avoid the enemy. But those speed rates and aggressive tactics just aren’t appropriate on state-side roads.

“We’re trying to be proactive because we don’t want to be caught in a situation where someone is more stressed or violent on the road,” says Hummel. “We’re trying to change their behaviors from the beginning and get their feet back on the ground and avoid that scenario.”

The soldiers spend an hour listening to a presentation, watching a video, and taking a quiz to reacquaint them with civilian rules of the road. About 4,000 soldiers went through the reinteg ration training this summer.

The Guard implemented its motorcycle training program after discovering that 22 percent of Iraq veterans have pursued bikes, compared to 7 percent of the rest of the population. Hummel says veterans falsely believe that riding a motorcycle can provide the same adrenaline rush as combat.

Instead, experienced bikers will tell them that riding a motorcycle is more about relaxation, comfort, and personal freedom. And that’s the message the Guard wants to send during 16 classes this year at Fort Snelling, Camp Ripley, and other locations. In cooperation with the state’s Office of Traffic Safety, the Guard will train more than 200 veterans in basic motorcycle riding and safety. Next year, it plans to offer a motorcycle course for experienced riders.

These programs are all about helping veterans adjust to being back in the States, where they can start operating at a much lower level of risk. It’s safer for the vets, their families, and everyone else on the road.

In the beginning of Click It or Ticket, the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, Office of Traffic Safety, the Minnesota State Patrol, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota. As part of this program, DPS/OTS coordinates several initiatives that are implemented by the state patrol and local law enforcement, including many that employers and communities can use in conjunction with their own safety programs to raise awareness of traffic safety issues and ultimately reduce traffic deaths and injuries in Minnesota.

PROTECTING YOUR BEST ASSETS

Many of the safety programs at the engineering firm Bonestroo focus on driving passenger vehicles at construction sites. With many pieces of large equipment operating on site, there is vast potential for collisions and other mishaps.

Roseville-based Bonestroo stresses parking company or other vehicles together so they are more visible to the large equipment drivers, putting safety cones around a parked car or truck, and walking around a vehicle before driving it to ensure there are no obstacles, explains construction manager Paul Perez.

Approximately 350 of Bonestroo’s 540 employees drive on the job, so the company partnered with the Minnesota Safety Council to develop a defensive driving course.

Bonestroo pays employees for their time to take the online course, either on the job or from home. The class covers basic driving skills, offers a refresher on the rules of the road, and provides guidelines for driving in high-traffic areas.

“Employees are the biggest asset Bonestroo has, and we want them working in a safe environment,” says Perez. “You should always try to improve your safety programs and the safety of employees.”

These courses are well worth the money, he argues, because many insurance companies will lower commercial clients’ premiums if they offer driver safety classes and reduce employee-related traffic crashes.

As someone who drives regularly for Bonestroo, Perez personally has taken the defensive driving course. He says it made him a better driver by refreshing his memory about certain rules of the road, such as right-of-way.

WORKING ON THE ROAD

For the trucking industry, on-the-road safety has been stressed for years, especially because the road is the workplace for truck drivers. Most trucking companies have their drivers undergo continual refresher courses on safety, both to keep their drivers and the roads safer.

Many companies focus on fatigue management. That means stressing a healthy diet and the proper amount of sleep. Many truckers now plot their routes in more detail, working out times and places for meals, rest breaks, and locations to sleep at night, says John Hausladen, president of the Minnesota Trucking Association in Roseville.

Some of the larger trucking companies also use driving simulators that run truckers through various conditions and instruct them on how to handle dangerous situations.

“Trucking companies understand that safe driving is also profitable driving,” Hausladen says. “If we can keep our trucks out of accidents we keep people safe and we keep our claims down to the insurance companies. It’s in our best interest to have the safest drivers we can.”

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Traffic Safety

The Costs Are High for One Bad Decision on the Road

It's the knock on the door in the dark of night that no one wants to hear—especially when you've been the bearer of similar bad news during a 30-year career in law enforcement. So Tom Kummrow knew the situation was not good when he answered the door shortly after midnight in October 2005 and learned that his 26-year-old son was involved in a serious car crash.

Driving without a seat belt, Darin Kummrow lost control of his Jeep and rolled it on a gravel road outside of Fergus Falls. As the top came off the vehicle, Darin was ejected and slammed his head on a fence post. He suffered a serious head injury and needed to be airlifted to MeritCare Hospital in Fargo.

Throughout that night and the next day Darin had three surgeries, including one that removed a piece of his skull to relieve pressure from his swelling brain and another to repair broken bones in his legs and hips.

If Darin’s injuries weren’t traumatic enough, his parents were shocked to learn the morning of the crash that their son’s medical bills already were going to use up his car insurance medical benefits. “That hit us hard. You think that if you have insurance, all this will be taken care of,” says Tom Kummrow.

“Little did we know how quickly the costs can get so high and max out the insurance,” Darin hit the limits on his health and car insurance right away, forcing him to sign up for state medical assistance and Social Security disability. After six weeks in a coma, he still has not been able to return to work.

Jeff Nachbar, public policy director for the Brain Injury Association of Minnesota, says the Kummrows’ financial situation is fairly common for people involved in serious car crashes. “Brain surgery is about the most expensive surgery you can have,” he says. “First they muck out insurance, and then their savings, because you can’t qualify for public health care unless you are impoverished.”

And while individuals and families often bear the brunt of costs from car crashes, employers and the state of Minnesota take a financial hit as well. Every time someone died on a Minnesota road in 2006, it cost $1.5 million in medical bills, insurance, law enforcement, emergency medical services, and lost productivity, according to the National Safety Council. Similarly, each serious injury crash in 2006 racked up $60,500. In total, car crashes caused $1.6 billion in economic losses in Minnesota in 2006.

Last year, 494 people died and 35,025 people were injured from crashes on Minnesota’s roads—1,844 of them with severe injuries, according to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety. Whether a collision caused severe or moderate injuries, it still had a resounding impact on the lives of the victim and his or her family.

Those who are gravely hurt face a long road of rehabilitation to an uncertain future. Some regain their health, but many others no longer can hold the same job. Those who suffer brain injuries face unstable financial prospects because of huge medical bills and altered careers. Some relationships also succumb to the strain of caring for a grievously injured person, leading to divorce or estrangement, says Nachbar. Similar stresses occur when someone suffers a spinal-cord injury from a car crash. Michael Sandmann, director of physical medicine at Bethesda Rehabilitation Hospital in St. Paul, has seen it time and again during a 27-year career as a physical therapist. Not only is the life of the injured person drastically altered, his or her immediate family is affected financially, emotionally, and physically, too.

Many spouses, parents, or children of crash victims drop out of their normal lives to spend significant amounts of time at the hospital while the injured party undergoes rehabilitation. When someone is critically hurt, that can last for a year or two. Hospital staff often see family members whose own health is in jeopardy because they are devoting so much time and energy to caring for their loved one.

“They are so intensely involved in the hospital experience and recovery that they aren’t getting any rest or doing anything to recharge and recuperate,” says Sandmann. Additionally, “most of our patients will have a severe drop of income, and so will their immediate family, during the first couple of years after the accident.”

That’s something Kummrow can relate to. After Darin’s car crash, he and his wife practically lived at the hospital for the first two months. They took leaves of absences from work and rented an apartment in Fargo. Though the family grew closer after the crash, it was also stressful for Darin’s parents and two brothers. It took about six months of life to return to some semblance of normal. “Our lives just stopped,” Tom Kummrow says.

Things are looking up now for Darin. He had his last surgery one year after the crash, and he finished therapy this summer. But things will probably never be the same for him or his family.

“His brain injury will always give him some problems, and he’s not working at this point,” says Tom Kummrow. “But we hope he will be productive and working. From where he was a year ago, it’s great.”

When Steve Murphy was elected to the Minnesota Senate in 1992, he strongly opposed a bill that would have made wearing a seat belt a primary moving violation. The law would allow police to pull over a driver for not wearing a seat belt, currently law enforcement can only issue a seat belt ticket if they stop a driver for another offense. Murphy, DFL-Renville, believed the state would be acting as Big Brother, controlling what people do in their cars.

It’s a common view in the Minnesota Legislature, especially in the House, where similar seat belt bills have languished in committee for years. But over the next four years, Murphy slowly changed his mind. He now sponsors this very bill in the Senate that he once strongly opposed a bill that would have made wearing a seat belt a primary moving violation.

According to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, those who are gravely hurt face a long road of rehabilitation to an uncertain future. Some regain their health, but many others no longer can hold the same job. Those who suffer brain injuries face unstable financial prospects because of huge medical bills and altered careers. Some relationships also succumb to the strain of caring for a grievously injured person, leading to divorce or estrangement, says Nachbar. Similar stresses occur when someone suffers a spinal-cord injury from a car crash. Michael Sandmann, director of physical medicine at Bethesda Rehabilitation Hospital in St. Paul, has seen it time and again during a 27-year career as a physical therapist. Not only is the life of the injured person drastically altered, his or her immediate family is affected financially, emotionally, and physically, too.

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Tom Kummrow with his son, Darin.
Last year was deadly for the teenagers of Marshall, Minnesota, and its nearby communities. In all, 12 young people were killed in a numbing succession of crashes. For Cary Grover, an executive at The Schwan Food Company, the tragic drumbeat of funerals, memorial services, and vigils throughout the community of 12,000 hit home in August 2006 with the death of Jesse Citrowske, a 14-year-old killed while riding his bicycle to cross country practice. Family and friends erected a roadside memorial at the crash site on Highway 23 not far from Grover’s home, and Grover kept going past it.

“There was a day I drove by it and I thought, ‘I can’t keep going by this spot and seeing that and acting as if life is normal. We have to do something about this.’ It was a call to action for me,” says Grover, vice president and senior director of manufacturing at Schwan’s. “Nothing is going to change unless we get something started.”

So Grover started something—a campaign to make Marshall and its surrounding communities safer for all residents. He enlisted a rich cross-section of civic and business leaders and together they formed the Marshall Area Safe Communities Coalition.

Since its creation in December 2006, the coalition already has achieved several successes, including the installation of sidewalks and controlled crossing areas at

Highway 23 near the new Marshall High School—just in time for the new school year.

Grover formerly headed environmental health and safety programs at Schwan’s, and he tapped into his public safety contacts to gather coalition members. Soon enough, the group had 35 enthusiastic participants, with representatives from the local and state police, school officials and students, health care and engineering experts, members of city government, and the business community.

The coalition organized into five subcommittees that focus on education, engineering, emergency medical services, enforcement, and bicycle safety, and quickly got busy finding ways to involve the citizens of Marshall in building a safer community. Members also reached out to organizations like the Minnesota Safety Council, AAA Minnesota/Iowa, and state agencies that focus on safety, which provided tools and guidance for getting the coalition up and running.

A key ally for Grover in the effort to improve safety in Marshall is Mike Cirk, a fleet manager for the Minnesota Department of Transportation. A parent of young children, Cirk knew the families of some of the teenage crash victims.

Highway 23 is one of the busiest in town, and he often saw kids walking along the median and shoulder trying to cross to the high school.

Cirks raised the idea of installing a sidewalk to the high school. City, county, state, and other officials told Cirks that if someone would spearhead the effort they would certainly get involved. So the coalition rolled into action. After presenting a petition with more than 400 signatures to the Marshall City Council, the various parties committed the land and funding for the sidewalks and crossings.

Other coalition projects include:

• • • A week-long seat belt awareness campaign at Marshall High with a “Lunch and learn,” where emergency medical responders displayed the laws of life and an air ambulance that’s used after severe car crashes, a flyer campaign let by students who tagged each car in the parking lot with a window cling that says ‘Bang head here if you aren’t buckled up.’ A survey later revealed that 76 percent of the students, parents, and passengers wore seat belts, and 91 percent of the faculty and staff were buckling up.

• • • A bicycle safety day in partnership with the Marshall Department of Public Safety and the YMCA, among others, providing quality discounted bicycle helmets and a basic safety course for young bike riders.

• • • Applying for funds to grant programs that will encourage students to walk to school by providing crossing guards along safe, designated walking routes.

• • • The development of a “safe communities” program through “ward Zero Deaths”—a partnership of state entities working to eliminate fatalities on state roads—which includes constructing a more pedestrian-friendly downtown Marshall.

For Kim Hornan, 16, a Marshall High student council and coalition member who helped orchestrate the events, the efforts to keep fellow students safe hit home directly. She was good friends with some of the teenagers who died and still feels the absence of fellow students.

“What we can do to change a few things in Marshall is one was collectively pooling their talents, time, and resources to make some of these programs or activities happen. We tapped into an avenue to fill that void,” Grover says. “It also speaks a lot to how we do things in Marshall. It’s a very engaged citizenry, and many others have told me they just haven’t seen anything like it in their own communities.”

Though Marshall began its safety efforts in the wake of multiple tragedies, coalition members hope other communities can learn from their efforts and make something positive come out of their devastat-

ing experiences.

WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO

• Distribute payroll stuffers and brochures.
• Post materials on displays, bulletin boards, and outdoor marquees.
• Include traffic safety at employee health fairs.
• Implement a seat belt policy.
• Provide simple rewards for seat belt use.
• Make traffic safety the topic of a brown bag lunch seminar.
• Train employees in defensive driving techniques.
• Work with law enforcement, schools, and other organizations to develop community-wide awareness.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

In a short period of time, the coalition energized a varied group of community residents behind its efforts to make the Marshall area safer for all residents. What has led to this success?

Marshall Police Chief Robert Yant believes the coalition has made significant progress by engaging a diverse group of leaders from various interests. Involving a wide swath of people allowed the coalition to take advantage of more resources and people’s differing expertise.

“We built informal partnerships— we’ve had in the past into more of a formal structure,” Yant says. “Obviously the police department has been dealing with these types of issues as a core part of what it does, but the impact is usually far more substantial if you hear that message from people when it’s not what they normally do.”

Grover attributes the coalition’s early achievements to starting the project at the right time and place. After the 12 youths died in 2006, residents of the Marshall area were weary of hearing about tragedy after tragedy. Many times in this close-knit community people knew the teens or the family involved and wanted to do something—anything—to prevent more incidents.

“There really was a void where no one was collectively pooling their talents, time, and resources to make some of these programs or activities happen. We tapped into an avenue to fill that void,” Grover says. “It also speaks a lot to how we do things in Marshall. It’s a very engaged citizenry, and many others have told me they just haven’t seen anything like it in their own communities.”

Marshalling Community Resources

ONE SOUTHWESTERN MINNESOTA COMMUNITY TAKES ACTION TO PROMOTE TRAFFIC SAFETY.

CREATING INROADS

A reporter for Grover in the effort to improve safety in Marshall is Mike Cirks, a fleet manager for the Minnesota Department of Transportation. A parent of young children, Cirks knew the families of some of the teenage crash victims.
Teens at Risk
SAFETY ADVOCATES STRIVE TO PROMOTE SAFETY AMONG TEENAGE DRIVERS.

An ad that ran in national newspapers this spring posed the question: “Why do most 16-year-olds drive like they are missing a part of their brain? Because they are.” For Ken Winters, a psychiatry professor at the University of Minnesota who specializes in adolescent health, the ad succinctly sums up the issue of teens behind the wheel.

Current neuroscience research has found that human brains don’t fully develop until our mid-20s. The last part to finish maturing? The brain’s judgment center, or its brakes. That means that younger people’s brains are ruled more by emotion and physical activity.

“Putting it another way,” says Winters, “it means that the teen brain is not at its best or isn’t optimal when it comes to resisting impulses, carefully considering the pros and cons of one’s behavior at a given moment, of showing thoughtful judgment in the face of temptations, and challenges.”

These findings get played out on the road daily by teenage drivers. They are less likely to wear seat belts or have the proper seat belts. Teens behind the wheel.

Though there is not much state variation in the number of drivers ages 15 to 25; nevertheless, teenage fatalities and serious injury crashes are more frequent in most states that have passed graduated-driver licensing systems, teenage fatalities and serious injury crashes than in those that have not.

In most states that have passed graduated-driver licensing (GDL) regulations, GDL laws add restrictions for the first six months after teenagers earn their driver’s licenses.

One restriction limits teens to one passenger under the age of 21 who is not a family member. “This can reduce the distractions for teen drivers,” says Gail Weinholzer, director of public affairs for AAA Minnesota/Iowa. “Typically, older drivers will drive more safely with more people in their vehicle, but teenagers tend to succumb to peer pressure and distractions. The greater the number of teenagers in a vehicle, the greater the likelihood of a crash.”

Another restriction would keep teen drivers without parental supervision off the roads from dusk to dawn. This gives teenagers time to gain more experience—with an adult in the car—in judging speeds and distances of other cars after dark.

In most states that have passed strong graduated-driver licensing systems, teen fatalities and serious injuries have dropped dramatically. After North Carolina approved passenger and nighttime GDL restrictions, fatal and serious injury crashes plummeted nearly 40 percent.

Yet Minnesota is one of only four states that has neither a nighttime driving or limited passenger law. “We have one of the weakest laws in the nation,” notes Weinholzer. “We have an independent-minded legislature that believes these are parental-rights issues. What they don’t consider is that two-thirds of people who die in crashes with teen drivers are not teen drivers. That clearly shows it’s a societal issue.”

The benefit of both restrictions is that they give teen drivers more experience handling the challenges of driving. Weinholzer likes to illustrate this by comparing it to playing video games. When talking to teens, she frequently asks how many of them die immediately the first time they play a game. Most raise their hands. And after they’ve played 20 or 100 times, were they not better? They all raise their hands.

Traffic safety advocates believe it’s high time we take action. Programs specifically developed for young drivers include two resources from the National Safety Council: Alive at 25, an interactive four-hour program for drivers ages 15 to 25; and Teen Driver: A Family Guide to Teen Driver Safety, a publication for families and teens. AAA offers Driver-ZED, an interactive DVD. Teens Behind the Wheel, is a Minnesota-specific program for 15 to 17-year-olds.

“We as a society have somewhat dismissed the problems associated with teen crashes,” says Pehson. “It’s expected and a tragedy, but it’s a tragedy for someone else. We don’t focus on the issues as much as I believe we should.”

WHAT IS THE LARGEST THREAT TO YOUNG ADULTS?
(a) Violence?  (b) Gangs?  (c) Suicide?  (d) Substance abuse?

Guess again. Motor vehicle crashes are the NUMBER ONE cause of death for young adults aged 16 to 24.
FOR SENIOR CITIZENS, ROAD SAFETY TAKES ON NEW DIMENSIONS, INCLUDING WHEN TO STOP DRIVING.

It is a conversation children dread having with their elderly parents or relatives: driving safety. The discussion often pits the conflicting desire for seniors to retain their independence against keeping them and others safe on the road. Though the vast majority of older adults are safe drivers who self-regulate their time behind the wheel—not driving at night or on highways, for example—studies show that mature drivers fall into a risk category nearly equal to drivers age 16 to 24, and they are more likely to die from crash injuries.

There are multiple physiological reasons that some older drivers experience difficulty in driving safely, including slowed reaction time, and cognitive processing, and reduced peripheral vision, according to Connie Shaffer, director of the Courage Center’s Golden Valley–based Driver Assessment and Training Program. “Older drivers tend to have more trouble multitasking and putting it all together,” Shaffer says. “Seniors might be living alone and getting around time. When you put someone in a car going 30 to 60 miles per hour you need a whole different set of skills.”

Mature drivers concerned about their own driving might consult a resource, such as AAVs Roadside Review. For concerned family members, it’s important to get in the car regularly with the senior to gauge his or her skill and comfort level. If they detect such problems as driving at inappropriate speeds, riding the brake, difficulty maintaining lane position, or being easily distracted, they might consider bringing in an emotionally neutral party, such as a physician, to facilitate the conversation.

The doctor can perform a physical and review his or her medical history—while raising the issue with the senior about their driving. If they see fit, doctors can even recommend to the state that the senior stay off the road.

These evaluations don’t always bring bad news. Sometimes, assessors suggest adaptations to a car that keep a senior safe. If a driver has arthritis in her right hip, for example, mechanics can modify the car so that the gas pedal is on the left, notes Elin Schold Davis, coordinator of the older-driver initiative for the American Occupational Therapy Association.

A driving evaluation that assesses vision, memory, and reaction time such as the one offered by the Courage Center, or Oakdale–based Adaptive Experts, might also be a good option.

Once seniors decide to stop driving, other issues arise: How can they keep from being stranded at home, or feeling like a burden on family members? That’s when organizations like Dakota Area Resources and Transportation for Seniors (DARTS) step in. For the past 34 years, DARTS has offered transportation services to older adults who have given up their keys, and it’s working with the Minnesota Partnership for Safe Mobility to increase transportation options for older adults so they can continue to live independently.

Other similar groups include Metro Mobility in the Twin Cities and many surrounding suburbs, as well as Anoka County Traveler, Human Services, Inc., in Washington County, and Scott Country Transit. Many social service agencies across the Twin Cities have programs that offer rides to seniors. Since the number of drivers aged 65 and older will double by 2030—as the Baby Boomers age—it’s important to start thinking more about transportation services. “We want people to drive as long as they can,” says Davis. “We’re not trying to take away rights or keys or independence. But there comes a time when conditions are unsafe for some people to drive.”

To find organizations that provide rides to seniors, go online to minnesotahealthelp.info or call the Senior LinkAge Line at 800-333-2433.

MANAGING YOUR DISTRACTIONS

The next time you catch yourself slamming on the brakes to avoid hitting someone, realize that you may be driving distracted. Manage your distractions with the following steps:

- Secure everyone and everything that could be a distraction.
- Don’t wait until you are driving to plan your route or attend to grooming. Plan before you go. Leave a little earlier—you’ll get there less stressed and more safely.
- Postpone complex or emotional conversations with passengers until you arrive at your destination.
- Pull over where it’s safe and legal if a passenger is distracting you, or you need to use your cell phone.
- Take a break when you are hungry or thirsty.
- Put away distracting materials, such as newspapers, business reports, or day planners, until you arrive at your destination.

Source: Minnesota Safety Council

Issues of control are a major contributor in galvanizing the public. People are less outraged about an issue when they have control over whether to subject themselves to the risk, says Peter Sandman, a risk communication consultant in Princeton, N.J. People generally feel in control when they believe they have the freedom to make a decision about their lives, he says. The Star Tribune’s lead story one day a week to another in the media spotlight was a story about a Minnesota child abduction.

Traffic crashes are so common, and that’s why we [the media] bury them,” Rosenblum adds. “We’re just not that interested in something that common. The human brain would rather focus on something creepy and unusual and worry about that. Maybe that’s our instinct, to worry about things we can’t control.”

MUTED OUTRAGE

Traffic crashes may take a back seat to other news in the media, but crash prevention should be on everybody’s front page.

Consider the numbers: Every year, about 500 people die on Minnesota’s roads, with another 35,000 to 40,000 injured, many severely. Car crashes are the leading cause of death for people ages 1 to 34, and the leading cause of traumatic brain injury, spinal-cord injury, and hospitalized injury, according to the Minnesota Department of Health. (Heart disease and cancer are the leading killers of people 35 and older.)

With such gruesome figures, it seems logical that a blinding spotlight would be regularly fixed on the problem, with an urgent statewide focus on confronting the problem, and addressing ways to minimize such mortality on the road.

But that isn’t always the case. Take the example of Randy and Kay Metzler, who were killed in a crash with a driver who had been drinking, according to police reports. Such a tragedy could have sparked a discussion in the media about three important traffic safety topics: impaired driving, motorcycle safety, or helmet use.

But the state’s leading newspapers, the Star Tribune and the Pioneer Press, both carried short articles about the crash inside their metro news sections. Follow-up articles the next day didn’t offer much additional context about safety on the roads.

And that’s a common reaction after a traffic crash. The question is, why is there little public outrage or demand from citizens that lawmakers take action? In fact, efforts to enact tougher seat belt laws or make regulations for teen drivers more stringent have stalled for years in the Minnesota Legislature.

“It’s the famous ‘Dog bites man’ versus ‘Man bites dog’ story. If a dog bites a man, there is no interest but if a man bites a dog, it’s going to be front page news,” says Gail Brest, a crime reporter at the Star Tribune who has covered family and children’s issues for 25 years. She often gets frustrated about the media’s focus on statistically minor issues—child abductions by strangers, school shootings—instead of preventable deaths such as car crashes or failing to wear a bicycle helmet.

“Car crashes are so common, and that’s why we [the media] bury them,” Rosenblum adds. “We’re just not that interested in something that common. The human brain would rather focus on something creepy and unusual and worry about that. Maybe that’s our instinct, to worry about things we can’t control.”

Managing Safety for Mature Drivers

TRAFFIC SAFETY 2007
control when they are behind the wheel, which equals less outrage.

"It explains why people respond with much less outrage and concern about car accidents than airplane accidents, where the pilot is in control," Sandman says. "Another factor is that memorable risks generate much more outrage than ones that aren't memorable. Airplane accidents are a big deal and car accidents are a little deal. Auto accidents are chronic—there are accidents every hour. There are airplane accidents a few times a year."

Injury prevention and traffic safety advocates also need to overcome the perception that car crashes are accidents and beyond anyone's control. It might come down to semantics, but advocates are working hard to change the notion that there is nothing we can do about collisions. "That's part of the mistake that these crashes are acts of God and couldn't be helped—it's an accident," says Jon Roesler, an epidemiologist and supervisor in the injury and violence prevention unit of the Department of Health. "Part of it is saying, 'no, these aren't accidents; they are preventable incidents.'"

Changing the public's perceptions can go a long way toward reducing traffic deaths. Sandman points to the success of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) in decreasing fatalities. Most drivers understand that drunk driving is dangerous; still, they argue with that?

"That's part of the mindset, that drunk driving is dangerous; still, they are preventable," he adds. "It's easy for people to bend the rules when they are anonymous like that. They go beyond what they probably should be doing."

INCREASE YOUR SAFETY

Like most people, you probably think the most you can do is drive defensively, but the American Automobile Association (AAA) disagrees. The AAA says that one of the biggest ways you can improve your safety is to learn how to drive defensively. This is a technique that allows you to anticipate what other drivers are going to do and react to it in a timely manner. By doing this, you can avoid collisions and stay safer on the road.

"There are countless motorists who don't think twice about driving above the speed limit, causing danger to themselves and others, or they tailgate, drive while talking on a cell phone, or fail to yield the right-of-way. Yet many of the same people would be mortified if they were caught stealing a pack of gum from a grocery store, observes Colonel Mark Dunaski, chief of the Minnesota State Patrol. "Why is one rule good and the other isn't?" he asks. "Driving 85 miles per hour has significantly greater consequences than going out of the store with a pack of gum. Yet one is a terrible ethical violation and the other is just what we do."

One reason for that contrast in moral outrage could relate to the anonymity of driving. It's hard to identify drivers in their cars, giving people the mental license to behave differently. Two shoppers who arrive at the same checkout aisle simultaneously might courteously offer to let the other person go first; if they were in their cars, that situation often leads to aggressive driving and potential crashes as one driver fights the other for right-of-way, Dunaski says.

"Besides having a license plate, you're anonymous in this hunk of metal," he adds. "It's easy for people to bend the rules when they are anonymous like that. They go beyond what they probably should be doing."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

So what should we be doing to help reduce or eliminate crashes?

"Drivers should strive to avoid the three largest contributors to crashes: speeding, driving impaired, and driving distracted," says Dunaski. "If motorists would address their conduct surrounding these negative driving behaviors, we would significantly save lives. Further, always wearing your seat belt would reduce the number of crash injuries and fatalities," says Dunaski.

In fact, wearing a seat belt is far and above the number-one safety measure people can take to protect themselves on the road. It can reduce risk of death or serious injury from a crash by up to 60 percent, according to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety. Last year, 52 percent of the nearly 500 people killed in car crashes were not wearing seat belts.

Additionally, it's critical that drivers slow down. They should stop driving while impaired, from alcohol or other substances, fatigued, or multitasking, such as talking on a cell phone or sending emails on a personal digital assistant.

Motorists must also share the road better with motorcyclists, bicyclists, and pedestrians. Though bicyclists are relatively safe on Minnesota's roads compared with other states, there are still about 1,000 crashes a year involving bikes and cars. Bicyclists must follow the same traffic rules as all motorists and must obey all traffic signals.

Drivers should treat bicyclists as they do other drivers, yielding the right-of-way in a normal fashion. Drivers and pedestrians must follow traffic signs and signals at intersections. At marked crosswalks (and intersections without marked crosswalks) where there are no traffic signals, drivers must stop for pedestrians. Pedestrians have the responsibility of giving drivers enough space and time to stop safely.

If these tips sound like common sense, that's because they are. But to really make a change in reducing the number of deaths on our roads, "we have to change people's mindsets," says Lieutenant Mark Peterson with the Minnesota State Patrol. "They need to take driving seriously because the results can be very, very serious if they don't."

And while car crashes seem like run-of-the-mill incidents that happen all the time, it doesn't feel that way when the victim is someone you love. Driving is one of the most complicated tasks we do each day, involving life and death decisions. It requires all of our attention.

CAR AND DRIVER TIPS

The way you drive plays a big role in how safe you are on the road. But there are other things you can do to increase your safety and the safety of your passengers.

- Buy a safe car. That might seem like obvious advice, but newer model cars have such safety features as anti-lock brakes, crumple zones, traction control, and side, pedestrian, and front airbags.
- Buy a tire gauge and check the air pressure once a month. Under-inflated tires are one of the most overlooked maintenance items. They can lead to dangerous conditions such as decreasing maneuverability, particularly in rain or snow, and can create drag, increasing fuel consumption.
- Keep your car properly maintained. Another important—and inexpensive—maintenance item that can improve safety is windshield wiper blades. Bad blades can cause streaking and glare on the windshield, so replace them frequently and keep your wiper fluid container full.
- Take a defensive driving class. Many organizations offer them—including the Minnesota Safety Council—teaching drivers how to anticipate problems in a variety of scenarios, such as driving on a rural road, in a congested urban area, or on a residential street.
- Make your driving more fuel efficient. Replacing your vehicle’s air filter every 30,000 miles is a good idea. Test whether the filter needs changing by holding it up to the light. If you can’t see through the filter, it’s time to change it. Routinely maintain your vehicle to the manufacturer’s specifications. Additionally, avoid “jack rabbit” starts in which you accelerate very quickly from a complete stop and drive at the posted speed limit. While that will make your car more fuel efficient, it will also keep you and your passengers safer. And who can argue with that?

Source: AAA Minnesota/Iowa.

Want to Boost Profits and Productivity?

Plug the Leak! When employees or family members are injured, company medical expenses, insurance premiums and absenteeism go up—and productivity goes down the drain. We provide training, consultation and tools to help you make your workplace safer and more productive.

To learn more about our traffic, workplace and family safety services, or to receive our FREE COURSE CATALOG call 651-291-9150/800-444-9150 or visit minnesotasafetycouncil.org.
DEFENSIVE DRIVING TIPS

1. Buckle up and be sure everyone in your vehicle buckles up, too. Make sure little ones ride in approved and properly installed child safety restraints.

2. Observe all traffic signs and signals—all of the time.

3. Plan your trip. Allow for weather and road conditions.

4. Check mirrors and blind spots, and signal before turning or making lane changes.

5. Drive defensively by constantly scanning the roadway for hazards. Pay attention. Don’t multi-task while you’re behind the wheel.

6. Adjust your driving speed to road, weather and other conditions. Don’t speed.

7. Don’t drive impaired and don’t drive while you’re drowsy. When you’re out with friends, use a designated driver.

8. Keep a three-second following distance from the vehicle in front of you, and more if driving conditions are poor.


10. Share the road responsibly with trucks, bikes, pedestrians and motorcycles.

11. Keep your cool. Don’t put yourself or others at risk by driving aggressively.

Source: Minnesota Safety Council

RESOURCES

For information about:
• general traffic safety
• bicycle safety
• child passenger safety
• drowsy/impaired driving
• mature drivers
• pedestrian safety
• seat belts
• teen drivers

Visit the Web sites of:
AAA Minnesota/Iowa
AAA National
www.astclubgroup.com/minia
www.aaapublicaffairs.com
www.aaafoundation.org

Minnesota Safety Council
www.minnesotasafetycouncil.org

In addition, the AAA Web sites provide information about motorcycle and vehicle safety. The Minnesota Safety Council site also provides information about the Minnesota Network of Employers for Traffic Safety, workplace defensive driving training, crash rate and cost calculators for employers, and community-based classes for mature drivers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Child passenger safety
www.CarSeatsMadeSimple.org

Minnesota Department of Public Safety/Office of Traffic Safety
www.dps.state.mn.us/ots

Minnesota Department of Transportation
www.dot.mn.us

Minnesota Network of Employers for Traffic Safety
www.minnesotasafetycouncil.org/nets/index.htm

Minnesota State Patrol
www.dps.state.mn.us/patrol

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
www.nhtsa.dot.gov

National Network of Employers for Traffic Safety
www.trafficsafety.org

National Safety Council
www.nsc.org

Safe Kids Worldwide
www.ussafekids.org

Toward Zero Deaths
www.tzd.state.mn.us

Traffic safety activities for children
www.safe-a-rooni.org

AAA Minnesota/Iowa and the Minnesota Safety Council are ready to work with your organization! Go to www.minnesotasafetycouncil.org/TCBsurvey.htm and tell us how we can help.