

Safe Communities of Madison - Dane County: Law enforcement agencies work together to reduce impaired driving

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Law enforcement agencies throughout Dane County are joining forces this holiday season to remind drivers it's not worth the risk to drive while impaired by alcohol or drugs. The Wisconsin State Patrol, Dane County Sheriff's Office, and all 20 local police departments in the county are working in partnership with the Dane County Traffic Safety Commission (TSC) to remind drivers to "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over." Together, these agencies will launch a special enforcement effort to get impaired drivers off the roads over the holidays.

"On December 15 and 29, our collaborative increased presence will help deter impaired driving and provide an opportunity for officers to talk with the public about the risk of getting behind the wheel after drinking or using drugs," said Lt. Chad O'Neil, Stoughton Police Department, co-chair of the Law Enforcement Subgroup of the TSC. "It's more than stopping or arresting drivers. Our goal is to save lives. Someone is killed or injured in an impaired driving crash about every two hours in Wisconsin. We must put an end to these preventable tragedies," Lt. O'Neil said.

Dane County Executive Joe Parisi emphasized the importance of this joint effort. "The holidays are known for being the deadliest season when it comes to impaired driving. In Wisconsin, over the holiday season last year from Dec. 15 through Jan. 1, there were 470 crashes involving impaired drivers. This campaign is happening now to ensure everyone can make it home for the holidays."

Parisi said that alcohol and drugs can have a significant impact on a driver's focus and ability to maintain control behind the wheel. "Last year in Dane County there were 549 crashes involving drivers impaired by alcohol or drugs. These resulted in 14 deaths and 274 injuries. So far this year in Dane County, there have been nearly that many - 548 alcohol or drug-related crashes. The year's not over, and the 15 related deaths already exceeded last year's total. Alcohol and drugs contributed to more than one-third of all traffic fatalities. "I'm pleased that our county's law enforcement professionals have committed to this joint effort to keep our roadways and those who depend on them safer."

The new Dane County campaign was announced in a press conference at Hotel Indigo, which is located in the "hotspot" area experiencing the most impaired driving crashes in the county. Over the past three years, 19 crashes have occurred in just nine blocks of East Washington, East Johnson, and East Gorham. Four other hotspot crash areas are in Madison and five in the cities of Sun Prairie and Monona, and the towns of Dunn, Springfield, and Deerfield. These areas will receive special attention during this campaign.

After the holidays, the Dane County Traffic Safety Commission will announce the number of traffic stops, citations, warnings, and OWI arrests made during this effort.

Everyone can help with this effort. Lt. O'Neil offered these tips:

- If you plan to celebrate, identify a sober designated driver, call a taxi, use a rideshare service or find another safe ride home.
- Never allow someone who is impaired to get behind the wheel. If a friend is about to drive after drinking or using drugs, take the keys away and help them get home safely.
- If you suspect a driver is impaired, call 911. Provide as much detail as possible on the driver, vehicle, and location.

Lt. O'Neil said three multi-jurisdictional high-visibility OWI task forces in Dane County work year around to stop impaired drivers through special enforcement efforts.

Middleton Police Chief Troy Hellenbrand, president, Dane County Chiefs of Police Association, emphasized the benefit of all the agencies working together. "This effort brings together larger and smaller law enforcement agencies across the county at one time with one purpose: to save lives and reduce injuries on our county roadways. "We cannot overstate the importance of abstaining from driving after using alcohol or drugs," Chief Hellenbrand said. "This enforcement campaign helps us get the message out that driving under the influence is illegal and takes

lives. Help us put an end to these needless tragedies.”

Hee Soo Jung, MD, FACS, FCCM, trauma surgeon, UW Health, and associate professor of surgery, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, said serious injuries from motor vehicle crashes represent the second highest patient population annually at the UW Health Level I Adult Trauma Center. “Increasingly, these crashes involve alcohol or substance use impaired driving,” he said. “They affect the healthcare teams who care for patients, from first responders at the scene, to emergency department teams, and trauma surgeons, nurses, and hospital staff. “It is distressing to watch the rapidly growing rate of such crashes, the worry of family members, as well as the anguish and guilt of the impaired driver. The injuries we see are often complex and result in lifelong complications, are lifechanging, and too often life-ending.”

No one knows that better than John Miller, whose son, Jack, and two friends lost their lives in a horrific 2021 crash in the Town of Middleton. “Our lives are irreparably damaged without our son, Jack, and we miss him every day. It hurts,” said Miller. “What I didn’t expect was not only the impact on his friends but also his high school and the broader Madison community. Other families should not have to feel the pain that our families will endure the rest of our lives.”