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MATT HELMS: Group: Put the brakes on impaired driving

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Michigan escaped an ugly designation Tuesday when a prominent group of doctors and other advocates issued a call for government leaders, health professionals and others to renew the battle against impaired driving.

Michigan was not one of the states to be grouped into the so-called Fatal Fifteen targeted by END, the acronym for the Coalition to End Needless Deaths on Our Roadways. In those states, at least 44 percent of traffic deaths in 2003 were related to alcohol.

Michigan and the nation have seen steady decreases in impaired-driving carnage. In 2003, the 399 people who died in Michigan crashes in which the driver had been drinking represented 31 percent of the 1,283 people killed in traffic crashes, according to the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning. (That's a drop from a peak in the last decade of 566 alcohol-related traffic deaths in 1995.)

But END leaders said during a news conference Tuesday in Chicago that even these successes aren't enough, and the group is urging everyone -- regular folks, governors of the Fatal Fifteen, and nurses, doctors and other health care providers nationwide -- to look at new ways to combat the problem.

Alcohol-related deaths "are not accidents -- they are predictable and preventable events," END's cochairman, Dr. Thomas Esposito, director of Loyola University Medical Center's Injury Analysis and Prevention Program, told me by phone Tuesday.

"The bottom line is, it is still intolerable," Esposito says. "If you had a 25-percent rate of polio or West Nile virus, the public would be up in arms."

END hopes to encourage heightened awareness but also practical steps health care providers can offer. They include more vigilance among nurses and doctors whose patients trust them enough to take advice about potential drinking problems, and providing brief, nonconfrontational interventions -- brief counseling sessions -- in settings such as hospital emergency rooms.

END is targeting the Fatal Fifteen -- Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and Wisconsin -- along with Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. But END won't restrict its efforts to those states.

The group is just getting started and hopes to have its Web site, www.endneedlessdeaths.org, up and running in the next couple of weeks.

'Steer Clear of Pot'

December is National Drunk and Drugged Driving Prevention Month, and this year's message from the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign urges young people and parents to understand the risks of driving under the influence of marijuana.

The slogan: "Steer Clear of Pot."

According to the campaign, studies show:

- High school students are more likely to drink, smoke cigarettes and smoke marijuana just after earning their driver's licenses.
- Teenagers are almost equally as likely to drive after smoking marijuana as they are to drive after drinking.
- Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death among people ages 15 to 20.
- Nearly 20 percent of 16-year-old drivers will get into a collision in their first year of driving.
- People ages 15 to 20 make up 6 percent of the nation's licensed drivers but are involved in 14 percent of all fatal crashes.

The campaign urges parents to take a greater role in making sure young drivers understand the risks of driving under the influence of marijuana, including diminished concentration, perception, coordination and reaction time.

Those effects can be deadly when combined with the well-known propensity of new, inexperienced drivers to knowingly or unknowingly take risks behind the wheel.

For more information, parents can go to www.theantidrug.com. Teens can visit www.freevibe.com.

Contact **MATT HELMS** at driving@freepress.com -- e-mail is best -- or leave a message at 313-222-1450. Be sure to include your full name, the city where you live and day and evening phone numbers for verification.