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Danger on state roads

Maryland ranks among worst in alcohol-related traffic fatalities

By GREG BARRETT
SUN REPORTER

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An annual study on alcohol-related traffic fatalities ranks Maryland among the deadliest in the nation and is expected to give traction to new drunken-driving legislation headed to debate in **Annapolis**.

State lawmakers will consider next year a variety of measures that include mandatory ignition interlocks - breathalyzers used to start a vehicle - for drivers who have been found with a blood-alcohol level double the legal state limit of 0.08 percent, and three-year license suspensions for drunken drivers under age 21.

Yesterday's so-called "Fatal Fifteen" report, compiled by a nonprofit traffic safety advocacy group and the National Safety Council, listed Maryland as ninth among 15 states or territories where 42 percent or more of traffic fatalities last year were alcohol-related. Nearly 45 percent of Maryland's fatalities involved alcohol consumption. Nationally, the percentage was 39.

Rhode Island ranked first with 50.6 percent and Utah had the nation's lowest percentage with 24.3 percent of its traffic fatalities tied to alcohol. Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania and Virginia had 41.8 percent, 41.2 percent and 38.8 percent, respectively.

"This signifies to me that the state is failing to do all it needs to in order to wage a war on drunk driving," said Del. William A. Bronrott, a Montgomery County Democrat who chaired the county's 2000 Blue Ribbon Panel on Pedestrian and Traffic Safety. "It lends further credence to the call for more action legislatively as well as the need to give police ... more resources to do the job."

In 2001, the state's threshold for drunken driving was lowered to a blood-alcohol level of 0.08 percent from 0.10 percent. The next year, a state law banning open alcohol containers in the driver or passenger areas of vehicles went into effect. The violation is punishable by a \$25 fine.

But in the past three years, the percentage of Maryland traffic fatalities involving alcohol has successively crept higher, from 42 percent in 2002 to nearly 45 percent, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

No one has monitored this trajectory closer than victim and safety advocate Nancy Kelly

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of Timonium, the public policy liaison for Maryland's chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Nine years ago, Kelly's 20-year-old son, Dan, was struck and killed by a woman who admitted to police that she had just drunk two vodka-and-tonics, according to police testimony. Dan Kelly, a computer-engineering student at Virginia Tech, was walking alongside a campus road at night when he was hit by the woman's Chrysler New Yorker.

"It's a boat of a car," Kelly said yesterday. In court "the woman said that as long as you were standing she thought it was OK to be driving."

When Kelly heard the news about Maryland's poor standing nationally, she wasn't surprised. "It just reinforces what I've known for the last few years; it just kind of shows a trend," she said. "Everybody knows you don't drink and drive, but the message is not getting across to some people. ... If it was, we wouldn't have this terrible loss of life."

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. plans to reintroduce legislation next year that would automatically suspend the licenses of motorists under age 21 who drink and drive, said Ehrlich spokesman Henry Fawell. "The governor ... is absolutely dedicated to getting drunk drivers of the road," Fawell said.

State Sen. John A. Giannetti Jr., a Prince George's County Democrat, said yesterday that he would introduce legislation that would give drunken-driver probation officers more authority. He would make it easier for them to order ignition interlocks, allowing the devices to be placed on vehicles of drivers convicted of drunken driving.

The driver would pay for the interlocks, which cost about \$150 and \$50 a month to maintain, he said. The interlocks require a driver to pass a sobriety breath test before the car will start, but the system allows other sober passengers to override the tests.

Kelly doesn't believe the solution lies only with legislation.

"It all boils down to personal responsibility," she said. "Before you go out when you know you will be drinking, we must have a designated driver - someone drinking only soda and coffee - or you take a cab or you plan to stay at someone's home."

The second annual "Fatal Fifteen" study, spearheaded by the physician-led and Chicago-based group End Needless Death on Our Roadways, is intended to give perspective to a problem that "plagues society," said Dr. Thomas Esposito, the group's co-chairperson and the director of Loyola University Medical Center's Injury Analysis and Prevention Program.

"There is a tolerance for impaired driving that I do not think exists for things like the West Nile virus or, God forbid, the avian virus," he said. "When these things threaten, society rises up in arms."

After personal responsibility fails, Kelly said, sobriety checkpoints and traffic stops are the next line of defense. "No one is saying you can't drink," she said. "You just can't drink and drive."

During the Thanksgiving holiday weekend Maryland State Police increased its traffic stops by 80 percent over last year - to 7,430 - and arrested 127 motorists for driving under the influence of alcohol, an increase of 13 percent.

Before her son was killed - and the driver acquitted of involuntary manslaughter on legal technicalities - Kelly and her family used to donate to MADD whenever the organization called. "Everyone is against drunk driving," she said. "Like everyone else, we felt terrible whenever someone was killed by a drunk driver."

Then her son became a statistic.

"And we became the other people," she said. "It proved firsthand that no one is safe."

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