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DUI death rate high in state

45% of fatalities tied to alcohol, study says

By Joseph Sjostrom
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November 28, 2005

Drunken driving has continued to take lives by the thousands in many states despite improvements in road and vehicle safety, according to an organization of medical professionals, who urge governments and parents to focus more attention on safe driving in a report scheduled for release on Monday.

The report by End Needless Death on Our Roadways lists 15 states, including Illinois, in which 41 percent or more of traffic fatalities in 2004 were alcohol-related. The report says Illinois also was among the top 15 states in 2003.

Illinois' had 10.67 traffic fatalities per 100,000 people in 2004, below the national rate of 14.52 per 100,000 people, according to figures reported by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Only seven states had lower overall rates of traffic deaths, according to the figures.

However, 44.54 percent of Illinois' traffic fatalities were alcohol-related, according to the End Needless Death report, which was based on federal data. Rhode Island had the second-lowest overall fatality rate, with 7.68 traffic deaths per 100,000 people in 2004, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration figures, but had the highest percentage--50.6--of alcohol related deaths, according to the End Needless Death report.

The organization urges parents of teenage drivers to sign a contract that will be available Monday on its Web site, www.endneedlessdeath.org, that states safe-driving expectations for teens, including an absolute prohibition on drug or alcohol use by anyone, not just the driver, in a car operated by a person under age 21.

Adults assume that teens let peers mold their behavior and won't heed a don't-drink-and-drive lecture from parents, but the opposite is true, said Andrea Barthwell, co-chairman of the group and medical director of Timberland Knolls, a treatment facility for adolescent girls that will open in Lemont in January.

"Parents often think that their kids are listening more to other kids than to their parents, so [parents] pull back on making the rules clear," Barthwell said. "In fact, from focus groups with adolescents, we have

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learned the kids want to know what their parents expect from them and what their parents want them to do.

"Parental expectations are a lever for kids to use in standing up to their peers. When kids can say 'My mom would kill me if I did that,' it's more likely they'll refuse to be involved in risky or dangerous behavior."

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