

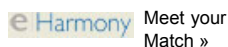
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Posted December 12, 2005

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Editorial: Celebrate holidays, but don't drink and drive

Wisconsin has made the top 10 in another list we'd rather not be on.

For the second straight year, Wisconsin and 12 other states are in the Fatal Fifteen — states with the highest percentage of fatal traffic accident in which alcohol is a factor.

A safety advocacy group, End Needless Death on Our Roadways, and the National Safety Council annually compile the list of states where more than 40 percent of fatal accidents involve alcohol.

The number of people killed in Wisconsin as a result of drinking and driving is down from the all-time high of 479 in 1982. But, after hitting a low of 302 in 1992, the number rose to 388 in 2003, though it dipped slightly in 2004 to 358, according to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration.

In Sheboygan County last year, eight people died and 96 others were injured in the 159 accidents in which alcohol was a factor, according to the state Department of Transportation. Six of the eight fatalities happened on city streets or county highways. Most of the injuries also occurred in crashes in those areas.

Last year, arrests for drunken driving reached an all-time high in Wisconsin with 43,200 motorists given tickets — a nearly 11 percent increase over the year before. Law enforcement is being aggressive in its enforcement of drunken driving laws — and they are getting the help of people with cell phones alerting them to suspected impaired driving.

Wisconsin has made some progress in reducing the number of alcohol-related traffic crashes and the percentage of them to all traffic crashes. But with more than 4 of 10 deaths on the highways the result of alcohol impairment, there is a long way to go.

Wisconsin residents, it seems, have a thirst for alcohol, based on our ranking among the top states in the nation for per-capita consumption. This tolerance spreads to young people, too, who think that alcohol is a vital part of the post-secondary education experience.

Wisconsin has lowered to 0.08 the blood-alcohol level as evidence of impaired driving as a way to further crack down.

Still, the number of people killed or injured in alcohol-related classes is disturbing.

We are coming up to the holiday season and the accompanying parties and celebrations. Many businesses have markedly cut back on office or shop parties in which alcohol is liberally served, but still we often hear of the husband, father, wife, mother, brother or sister who won't be around at Christmas dinner or to greet the new year because of an alcohol-related traffic accident.

But personal responsibility — a simple resolve on the part of all drivers to not drink and drive — will do more than any law or law enforcement presence to reduce the number of alcohol-related crashes.

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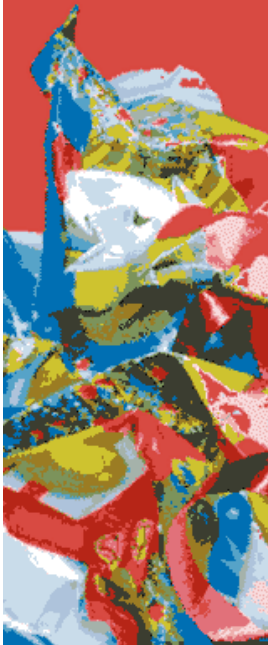
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