

Guest Column: Together, we are working to reduce traffic deaths to zero

Published 9:05 am Saturday, October 27, 2018

Reducing traffic deaths on Minnesota roadways is a daunting task. Issuing more tickets, installing more stoplights and passing more laws may help, but these tactics alone can only go so far. That's why 15 years ago Minnesota developed a traffic safety program called Toward Zero Deaths by tapping into the collective expertise of the traffic safety community. TZD works to make roads safer by finding solutions in the fields of engineering, education, enforcement and emergency medical and trauma services.

TZD is an interdisciplinary approach led by the Minnesota's departments of health, public safety and transportation. We've found that working with partners at the grassroots level is the key to the success of TZD. We use data-driven approaches tailored to community needs.

More than 1,000 stakeholders attended TZD's annual conference this week (Oct. 23-24) to talk about what they can do to reduce traffic deaths. It was a time to honor our partners who champion traffic safety initiatives. This work is what has reduced traffic deaths from 368 in 2011 to around 300 so far this year. Overall, since TZD began in 2003, there's been a 45 percent reduction in traffic deaths.

So what are some of the ideas TZD has developed?

In emergency services, for instance, quickly getting crash victims to the care they need has improved. Almost all Minnesotans live within 60 minutes of a high-level trauma care emergency room that can handle the kinds of serious injuries sometimes suffered by traffic crash victims. An aeromedical auto launch system automatically sends a helicopter when a 911 call is made, instead of waiting for responders to arrive on the scene. This reduces response time for those who need acute medical help, especially in greater Minnesota.

In law enforcement, there have been many highly visible, targeted efforts, including seat belt compliance and eliminating distracted driving. Those efforts are supported and conducted by the state patrol, county sheriff departments and city police. There's also been passage of stronger traffic safety policies related to seat belt use, texting while driving, ignition interlock, graduated driving licensing, impaired driving and speeding in work zones. DWI courts lowered the rate of repeat offenders from 78 percent to 31 percent.

Education is also a key ingredient for success. Last year, nearly 170,000 students took motorcycle safety training, compared to 375 in 1986. In 2011 and 2012 advance rider courses were made available. We have also seen a dramatic increase in the public education efforts regarding traffic safety by the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Transportation. These agencies have become expert at using social media and other tools to urge the public to avoid distractions, plan ahead and use extra caution when driving during bad weather or in work zones.

On the engineering side, motorists will find more than 700 miles of high-tension cable median barrier, which has helped reduce fatal head-on crashes by 95 percent. The last few miles of cable median barrier on Interstate 35 from the Twin Cities to the Iowa border were just

recently installed. Roundabouts also are popping up across the state. These intersection rebuilds remove all right-angle crashes and have reduced fatalities at intersections by 86 percent. Reduced conflict intersections, which reduce vehicle exposure to broadside crashes, are used on four-lane divided highways and have shown a 70 percent reduction in fatalities and a 42 percent reduction in injury crashes.

Rumble strips along roadway centerlines and shoulders warn motorists when they are inadvertently departing lanes. These devices have reduced fatal, injury and cross-over crashes by 44 percent since 2012.

TZD continues to work on innovative approaches that will become best practices on our state roadways and will continue to further reduce deaths and serious injury crashes. It's a comprehensive approach that has worked well, and one which other states have begun to imitate. In fact, the national TZD program was modeled after the Minnesota effort.

If we truly want to get to zero traffic deaths, traffic safety needs to be ingrained into our culture. It's similar to what happened with seat belt use, recycling and advocating for no smoking. Engineering, education and enforcement are great tools for reducing deaths, but to get to our goal of zero deaths we need everyone who gets behind the wheel to put safety first.

Commissioner Mona Dohman

Minnesota Department of Public Safety

Commissioner Charlie Zelle

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Commissioner Jan Malcolm

Minnesota Department of Health