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Zero Fatalities safety summit

Message: Allowing speeders costs lives

UHP super predicts troopers would scoff at a zero-tolerance policy

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PARK CITY - Utahns and Americans need to soften their hard line on personal freedoms to prevent traffic deaths, an anti-crash crusader told participants at the state's recent "Zero Fatalities" safety summit.

The 251 people killed on Utah roads so far this year might still be here if the state took such controversial steps as requiring an "intellectually sophisticated" driving test, enforcing the speed limit with no cushion, banning cell phones on the road, allowing police to stop those not wearing seat belts and revoking drunken drivers' licenses.

Speed alone killed 61 last year in Utah, according to state records. That's no accident, said Col. James Champagne of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission during an impassioned keynote address Thursday.

"People speed because we let them," Champagne said, referring to a 10 mph cushion in speed enforcement that he said is almost universal nationwide. A zero-tolerance enforcement policy would quickly slow most drivers, he said.

Likewise, he said, Utah should allow traffic stops based solely on failure to wear seat belts.

Europe has dramatically improved highway safety over 20 years because Europeans will accept personal limitations for the public good, Champagne said. They have more rigorous driving tests, he said, and they lose their license for a year on a first drunken-driving offense, and for life on the third.

Across the Atlantic, Champagne said, Americans routinely get off with a reckless driving charge and retain their licenses if they'll undergo education about impaired driving.

Twenty years ago, Europe and the United States each suffered about 26 road deaths per 100 million miles traveled, Champagne said. Since clamping down, Europe's rate has fallen to six deaths, while safety improvements here have brought the rate down to 16.

The good news for Utah is that its rate of alcohol-related deaths, 24 percent, is best in a nation that averages 40 percent. The bad news is it spiked 10 percentage points last year, from 14 percent, for the largest increase nationwide, Champagne said.

The state's number of alcohol-related deaths has swung wildly in recent years: 75 in 2004, 37 in 2005, 48 in 2006.

Utah Highway Patrol Superintendent Lance Davenport listened and said he agreed with Champagne's goals, but would expect some "push back," beginning with troopers, if they became law. Troopers currently spend 70 percent of their time responding to incidents and have limited time left over to enforce the law, he said.

He predicted a common response might be, "If I am spending my day focused on the people driving 5 mph over, who's driving past me?"

Prosecutors are similarly overtaxed, Davenport said.

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