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Safety Groups Warn Parents of Increase in Teen Fatalities; Urge Teens to Slow Down and Buckle Up

The number of teen drivers killed in motor vehicle crashes in Virginia is up significantly in January from the previous year and regional and state safety organizations are urging teen drivers and their parents to take precautions to help prevent further tragedies.

According to preliminary statistics, 11 teens ages 16-20 died on Virginia roadways between January 1 and January 24, 2012, as compared to only three teens killed in the same time period in 2011. Youth of Virginia Speak Out About Traffic Safety (YOVASO) and the Blue Ridge Regional Crash Investigation Team say they hope to stop this alarming trend by bringing awareness to the issue and encouraging teens to buckle up and focus on safer driving. The organizations are also urging parents to set clear rules for their young drivers and to closely monitor their driving.

"The increase in teen fatalities is significant and we want to take a proactive approach to getting the word out to teens, their parents, and the school systems," said Mary King, YOVASO Program Administrator. "We need everyone working together to educate our teens so that this trend doesn't continue throughout the year."

"Since 2004, the Blue Ridge Regional Crash Investigation Teams have worked hard to educate our young people about the importance of safety behind the wheel, but we can't do it alone," emphasized Roanoke County Police Sgt. Tim Wyatt, a member of the Blue Ridge Regional Crash Investigation Teams group. "This needs to be a community-wide effort that begins at home. Families need to make it a point to talk to their kids and grandkids and remind them that their actions - what they do behind the wheel - will have life-long consequences," Sgt. Wyatt said.

According to the 2012 crash reports, the most prevalent causative factors in the fatal crashes were speed, distraction/inattention, and run-off-the road. Forty-five percent (5) of the teens killed were not restrained and 9 percent (1) was attributed to alcohol. Crash reports also show that an equal number of males and females were involved (7 males, 4 females), and that five of the fatalities were passengers and six were the drivers. The fatalities involved all ages, except 16 year olds; and occurred throughout the state with no one region experiencing more crashes than others. Two of the crashes involved multiple fatalities.

"Until this recent spike, Virginia had been experiencing yearly declines in teen fatalities since 2007," King emphasized. In 2010, 83 teens were killed in Virginia and preliminary figures for 2011 show that 81 teens were killed. Both are record lows for the state. "Every fatality is one too many and it is very disheartening to experience so many fatalities in the first month of the year," King said.

According to Sgt. Wyatt, motor vehicle crashes involving teens are preventable. "Parents need to have a serious talk with their kids about buckling up and slowing down," Sgt. Wyatt emphasized. "Lack of experience and distractions are among the biggest factors in teen crashes. In the past ten years," Sgt. Wyatt noted, "almost half of the teen fatalities have involved speeding and running off of the road. In addition, more than half were not wearing their seat belts."

To help keep teens safe on our highways, YOVASO and the Blue Ridge Regional Crash Investigation Team urge the following:

Teens:

- Make a commitment to driving safely and encourage your friends and family to do the same

- Always wear your safety belt - it is your best defense in a crash, and make your passengers buckle up as well
- Obey the speed limit - speeding is the top cause of death and serious injury in crashes
- Resist texting or talking on the cell phone while driving - it is against the law; and avoid other forms of distracted driving such as changing the radio, eating, and passenger distractions

Parents:

- Talk with your teen about the increase in fatalities and the dangers of speeding, driving distracted, and "cruising" with friends
- Set clear rules for driving and include consequences for violating cell phone, seat belt, curfew, passenger limitation, and other driving laws. Be firm and follow through with punishments.
- Continue practicing driving skills with your teen and monitoring his/her driving even after full licensure

Schools and Community Organizations:

- Announce/talk with the students about the increase in teen fatalities in Virginia
- Educate the students on safe driving practices through announcements, visual displays, guest speakers, programs, etc.
- Challenge the students to drive safely and to end the school year with zero fatalities
- Post seat belt reminders and no cell phone use signs in all parking areas

YOVASO is a statewide youth leadership program that enables teenagers to work towards the prevention of their number one killer - motor vehicle crashes. Through YOVASO, teens work together in school-based, service learning clubs to advocate for safer driving among their peers and to develop prevention strategies for their schools and communities. The program is

administered by the Virginia State Police Association and has over 100 member schools.

The Blue Ridge Regional Crash Investigation Team consists of separate crash teams across Southwestern Virginia consisting of crash reconstructionist from local and state law enforcement. The mission of the BRRGIT is to reduce the number and severity of traffic crashes through a joint-jurisdictional, multi-agency, multi-disciplinary approach to research crashes, analyze crash data, and develop effective community-based counter measures for prevention.

For more information on these organizations or to request more information about teen crashes, visit their websites at www.yovaso.net and www.blueridgecrashteam.org.

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