

# Opinion: Distracted driving isn't just a student problem

By Vicki Barber

A program to alert young drivers to the dangers of being distracted while driving is being quietly launched by student leaders, teachers and administrators at El Dorado County's five public high schools and the county Office of Education.

Even a split-second distraction can have deadly or long-lasting consequences, and the advent of cell phones and other electronic devices has compounded the danger, according to Dan Stark of the California Highway Patrol, which is collaborating with the schools on the program in conjunction with California Casualty and the California Teachers' Association.

Distracted driving now ranks at the top of causes of deaths of young persons from accidents, far ahead of driving under the influence causes, according to national statistics.



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The narrow, winding roads of sprawling El Dorado County also increase the risks locally, especially when combined with inexperience and speed, Stark said.

Each year there are several serious or fatal accidents in the county, many of which are believed to be due to the driver being distracted by something. There were two fatal accidents

and one serious-injury accident last spring, one of which involved DUI and the other possibly related to distractions.

One administrator got the “distracted driving” message with abrupt clarity the day before he and other officials were to meet with Stark to hear about the proposed program, early last summer.

“What was ironic was that the day before I went to meeting my daughter (Alissa) was driving down Pleasant Valley Road and ran into the car in front of her.” She just had enough time to swerve so she sideswiped the car, escaping injury but totaling her car and seriously damaging the other vehicle.

The cause was clear: “Her cell phone rang and she glanced down to see who it was. She didn’t ever pick it up. But when she looked up the car was right in front of her,” Volmer said.

Alissa is now attending USC. But Volmer said he was shocked when he went to see the car and saw the extent of damage and realized how close a thing it was to being a life-changing tragedy.

And at the meeting the next day, “I heard enough to know I need to be a better example.”

Volmer said the program being rolled out is designed for students and parents, as well as teachers and staff. After being introduced to teachers and administrators it has been referred to student leaders so there would be a peer-to-peer message.

“Parents will need to set an example if the program is to be successful,” Jeremy Meyers, deputy superintendent of the El Dorado County Office of Education, said.

Meyers said the county office is fully behind the awareness-raising effort due to the increased incidents of distractions from the proliferation of electronic devices. But he noted

that there are many other causes of distraction, from eating. putting on make-up or talking with passengers.

Even if there is no injury or fatality involved, accidents can cost thousands of dollars in repairs, increased insurance rates, fines and court costs, and add negative points to one's driver's license – underscoring that driving is a serious responsibility and needs to be taken seriously, Meyers said.

The program has been implemented in the Lake Tahoe Unified School District for the past few years and the data regarding decreased teen driving accidents has been impressive. Other high schools involved in the program are Golden Sierra, Ponderosa, Union Mine and Oak Ridge.

Stark agreed that distracted driving is a problem that has been around for decades, but added that cell phones have made it worse in recent years.

He noted that about 75 percent of teen deaths from auto accidents are “not alcohol-related,” while many of those involved being distracted.

Stark said the El Dorado County program will utilize materials and techniques developed by a broader program known as “Impact Teen Driver,” founded by Jon Hamm, president of the California Association of Highway Patrolmen.

“CHP officers consistently report the worst part of their job is coming onto a scene where a young person has needlessly lost his or her life and subsequently having to ring a doorbell to tell parents that they will never again see their child alive,” according to the website.

“The devastating impact of these fatal crashes on the teens involved, their families, communities, and the law enforcement officers who are first responders motivated the CAHP to work with one of its long-time partners, California Casualty, and the California Teachers Association to create a powerful

intervention designed to alter these grim statistics.”

*Vicki Barber is superintendent of El Dorado County Office of Education.*