

Florida Sheriffs *Making a Difference,* Saving Lives of Teen Drivers

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The patrol officer sits in his vehicle, re-telling the story about answering a call to a one-car accident. A guardrail can be seen through his windshield, with skid marks on the pavement.

He's somber, at first – professional – until he gets to one of the details. He talks about searching the vehicle in which the teenage girl had been ejected – her face smashed against the pavement. His voice grows quiet and he bites his bottom lip when he tells about seeing the girl's high school graduation robe in the backseat.

Cause of accident: texting while driving.

Curbing the Trend

No matter how many accidents our law-enforcement officers answer, it doesn't get any easier. Each young hand they hold through a shattered window, trying to be reassuring...every young person they see pinned under an upside down car, represents a life that could have been spared.

If only...

So how do you keep your teen from becoming a statistic? How do you prevent them from being a victim of the No. 1 cause of death among American teenagers? And how do you keep them from being one of those drivers in the 200,000 crashes annually that are caused by people who are texting?

A group of Sheriffs in Florida has at least one answer.

About three years ago, the Sheriffs of Florida decided they'd had enough. They were ready to do something to address the primary contributors to the killing of American teen drivers – speeding, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, texting while driving, and distracted driving.

A group of Sheriffs presented a concept to their fellow Sheriffs and the Florida Sheriffs Association (FSA) Board of Directors adopted the concept to implement in 2007. FSA helped organize a team of subject matter experts on law-enforcement driving, who were certified as instructors in emergency vehicle operation through the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. This team, made up of men and women in Citrus, Hernando, Leon, Osceola, and Volusia County Sheriffs' Offices developed the initial curriculum calling the program the "Teen Driver Challenge."

They started small. Leon County Sheriff's Office hosted a pilot course to educate teen drivers through classroom teaching and behind-the-wheel training at a law-enforcement academy driving range. Fairly quickly, other Sheriffs' Offices followed, and now the program is offered throughout the year at no cost to the teenagers in 32 of the 67 counties. As of last year, the Teen Driver Challenge has a website, Facebook page and headline sponsor – State Farm Insurance. Even better: more than 4,000 students have gone through the course.

One of the recent graduates is the son of Capt. Anne Herman at the Hillsborough County, Florida Sheriff's Office. She sent an e-mail to thank the instructors and other personnel serving on the Traffic Safety Awareness Team at her Sheriffs' Office. She wrote: "My son, who normally doesn't say anything to anyone – especially us – came home from your (Teen Driver Challenge) class and told us all about the cool techniques he learned. But it didn't hit home until last night when he was driving home from his ground-fighting class and he tried to stop on the wet pavement and began to skid. I think his words were, 'that ABS braking stuff really works!'"

"Well whadaya know?"

"You guys did more in eight hours than we could do in two years. So in case you ever wonder if what you do makes a difference – believe me, it does. As a Captain, I commend you on a great program. As a Mom, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Taking it on the Road

The Florida Sheriffs Association Teen Driver Challenge has given Sheriffs' Offices a new tool to reach high school students. Many have created theme vehicles from retired patrol cars – or snazzy rides that have been confiscated in drug seizures – and use them in parades and at school events to promote the program.

Florida Sheriffs Association TDC Coordinator Phil Rivers is busy helping new counties come online by training instructors, securing funding to grow the program, and identifying tools that can be used to make a lasting impression on the students.

He recently secured sets of "Drunk Buster Goggles," also known as DUI goggles, for each program throughout the state. These can be used to simulate levels of intoxication – just barely intoxicated, over the limit, and "knee-walking drunk."

Students are given a pair to wear and instructed to walk on a line similar to a roadside sobriety checkpoint. "They're able to see what it's like when you're drunk," Rivers says, "and it goes right along with our classroom portion on impaired driving."

In addition, seven "Seatbelt Convincers" are available to Sheriffs' Offices that offer TDC programs and are located in proximity to designated FSA zones for ease in transport. Seatbelt Convincers are portable sleds that allow riders to experience force – up to five times their body weight – similar to that of a 5-7 mph crash. The Convincer was developed to educate the general public of how beneficial the use of seat belts can be – even when involved in a low-speed collision.





Real Life Stories

The Florida Sheriffs Association continues to receive emails and letters from teenagers and their parents giving real life examples of how the training helped prevent a tragic accident. One involved a teen who experienced a tire blow out on the interstate. The girl remained calm and remembered what she'd learned during the TDC course – she was able to regain control and safely pull her vehicle off the road.

Her mother wrote: "As a parent, I want to thank you for offering this wonderful opportunity for teenagers to experience and learn how to handle their vehicles. The knowledge my daughter gained through this program has quite possibly saved her life. As we were discussing what happened that night (of the tire blowout) she mentioned several other instances where she was hydroplaning, for example, and she was able to remain calm and control her vehicle safely. She was the one who mentioned the Teen Driver Challenge program and how glad she was that her parents insisted she take it. Thank you again!"

Another parent wrote: "I just want to tell you how much I appreciate the Teen Driver Challenge. My son took the class in August (2010) and he tells me about accidents he has avoided as a result of taking this course. You may never know how many lives you have saved, but I hope you know that you are making a difference."

For more information about the Florida Sheriffs Association's Teen Driver Challenge visit the TDC website: www.teendriverchallenge.org or contact Phil Rivers by phone: 850-877-2165, ext. 246 or email: privers@flsheriffs.org.

State Farm also offers a website with resources for teens and parents who want to learn more and get involved. On the site, you will find information on state laws, driver discounts, parent handbooks and ways to stay connected. Find it at www.BetterTeenDriving.com. ⚡

Rivers is especially enthusiastic about a tool that's now being used by the Alachua Sheriff's Office, and is being considered for the teen training. The Easy Drift Skid Recovery System is an apparatus used on the rear wheels of a vehicle that can put a car at a full spin, even at 6 to 7 mph on a hard surface. The system can be used to teach drivers about hydroplane spins and how to control skids at very low speeds.

Easy Drift could be a very valuable training device used in the Teen Driver Challenge if the program receives funding for purchasing. The Alachua Sheriff's Office is playing a key role, as they are currently developing policies and procedures for using the system.

As part of the Teen Driver Challenge, the Florida Sheriffs Association became licensed statewide by the Florida Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles as a Commercial Driving School. Each law-enforcement instructor who teaches the TDC program is also licensed, under the FSA license, as a school instructor. Each new instructor goes through a rigorous "train the trainer" class with an original team member, or sits through an actual program under an established program's Instructor. The original team members take responsibility for TDC instructor training in certain areas of the state.



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