
Saving Lives/ / Saving Money

Public Employer Traffic Safety Programs

Sandy Reinsel Markwood

When you hear about motor vehicle crashes, your first thoughts are probably of the physical and emotional pain they cause, and rightfully so. More than 47,000 people were killed on our nation's highways last year, and millions more were injured as a result of motor vehicle crashes. But, as local government managers, did you know that motor vehicle crashes cost your local governments and other employers billions of dollars a year?

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among employees—and the leading cause of death for the entire population under 34. The average employer's workers compensation cost is \$110,500 for each on-the-job motor-vehicle-related fatality and \$2,400 for each injury. Injuries that cause total disability cost an average of \$25,400 and a like amount for uninsured costs. Add in the insurance costs of off-the-job motor vehicle crashes involving employees and their families, and the price tag for employers, both public and private, skyrockets.

In addition to these direct costs, as government managers trying to live within tight budget constraints, you must also consider the hidden costs that result when city or county employees are involved in motor vehicle crashes: supplemental wages and benefits, uninsured medical costs, administrative costs (someone has to file all the paperwork!), lost productivity, temporary replacements, additional job training, etc. While these hidden costs are difficult to measure, studies have shown that they equal and probably exceed direct workers compensation and insurance costs.

The fact is—whether one of your employ-

ees is involved in a motor vehicle crash on the job or off, it costs the city or county money. By discouraging drinking and driving and encouraging your employees to use safety belts, you can not only save lives and unnecessary pain and suffering—you can save money, too.

Growing numbers of government executives are moving aggressively to reduce deaths and injuries resulting from motor vehicle crashes. Two examples follow.

Hopewell, Virginia

Through a combination of efforts by city officials, the city of Hopewell, Virginia, has designed a safety belt policy that has been effective and widely accepted. According to City Manager Clinton Strong, "We have always had a very aggressive safety policy—whether it's in the wearing of hard hats or the posting of 'no smoking' signs."

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The city's mandatory safety belt policy is very firm, providing city employees with three warnings if they are found driving or riding in city vehicles without wearing their safety belts. Employees receive verbal notices on the first warning, suspension on the second warning, and firing on the third warning. Strong is quick to note, however, that no one has had to be fired for not buckling up.

To initiate the city's program, a kickoff campaign was held to reinforce the life-saving benefits of safety belts. Strong noted that one employee who had at first objected to the

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seat belt policy changed her mind after viewing a film about car crashes that left her shaken and convinced about the importance of buckling up.

Additionally, at the program's inception Strong randomly stopped city vehicles, leaving a \$5 bill for drivers wearing their belts and reprimanding those who weren't.

Two dramatic incidents occurring just months after the safety belt policy went into effect further strengthened the city and city employees' commitment to the program. The first was an incident when a dump truck fell over due to a steep incline. The driver inside, who was wearing his seat belt, was saved. In another incident, a tractor working on an extremely steep incline rolled over. However, the driver, who was wearing his seat belt, escaped unharmed.

Because of these incidents and others, Strong noted, "We're fanatics about safety belts."

Moore County, North Carolina

Realizing that motor vehicle crashes represent the number one cause of both lost work

time and on-the-job fatalities, the Moore County administration designed an educational and incentive program to promote proper safety belt usage among the county's 367 employees. The county employees program is part of a broader county safety belt effort entitled, "Moore in Seat Belts," which also includes an infant seat loaner program and public information campaign.

"The 'Moore in Seat Belts' project has been one of the more successful public awareness campaigns implemented for county citizens," according to County Manager David McNeill.

To kick off the county employees program, Vince and Larry, the crash dummies, visited many county agencies with the county manager to discuss the importance of traffic safety and the use of safety belts. To encourage county employees to wear their safety belts for their own protection and to set an example for the public, the county administration requested that county employees report other employees they had seen wearing their safety belts during working hours. Those reported belted were given "Moore in Seat Belts" notebooks and bumper stickers and

then became eligible for two grand prize drawings for savings bonds donated by area banks. Information regarding the program and safety belt literature was also included with county employees' paychecks.

As an added reminder to buckle up, 90 of the county's vehicles, including the cars in the sheriff's department, now display "Moore in Seat Belts" bumper stickers.

Setting Up a Traffic Safety Program

NETS, the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety, is a public-private coalition working to develop and expand highway safety programs in the workplace. Its goal is to save lives and reduce motor vehicle injuries among employees, and thereby save employers money.

With the support of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the National Commission Against Drunk Driving and others, the NETS program targets two areas of intervention that have the greatest effect on highway safety—drunk/impaired driving and failure to use safety belts.

The NETS program includes:

- Suggested employer policies regarding safety belt use and consumption of alcoholic beverages for those who drive city/county vehicles
- Workshops on safety belt use and drunk/impaired driving that draw on the resources and expertise of the community
- Safety education sessions, incorporating films, lectures, and presentations
- Fact sheets and other written materials for distribution to employees
- Articles for your city/county newsletter
- Safety reminders to be placed in company vehicles, at parking lots, in lobbies, and other high-traffic areas and in paycheck envelopes.

To receive complete NETS program information, write NETS, Executive Secretary, 1140 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 804, Washington, D.C. 20036.

For more information regarding traffic safety programs, contact Marilena Amoni, Office of Traffic Safety Programs, Washington, D.C., 202/366-4500. **PM**