

LIVES CUT SHORT: THE HIGH COSTS OF DISTRACTED DRIVING

Minnesota County Attorney Association's Crime Prevention Tip

According to the Office of Traffic Safety, inattentive or distracted driving was the most frequent cause of traffic crashes in 2012. Distracted driving occurs when a driver does anything that diverts their attention from driving. It includes talking on a cellphone, eating or drinking, grooming, using a navigation system, watching a video, and adjusting a radio or MP3 player. Above all, texting, e-mailing, or using the internet is the most dangerous distraction because it requires a driver to look away from the road while concentrating on the electronic device, and use one or both hands to manipulate the device.

As electronic devices become increasingly advanced, we are increasingly relying upon them in our daily lives. Whatever small task, message, or internet search, it is simply not worth the loss of life. This is particularly imperative when this loss of life is disproportionately suffered by our young people.

In 2011, young drivers surveyed admitted being involved in twice as many traffic crashes and near crashes as any other age group. They also reported the highest use of cell phones at the time or near the time of the crash. Indeed, the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration ("NHTSA") reports that in 2011, 21% of fatal traffic crashes involving 15 to 19 year olds involved the use of cell phones. Educating ourselves about the strong connection between distracted driving and traffic crashes is even more critical since the Office for Traffic Safety announced that traffic crashes remain the leading cause of death for young people in Minnesota.

However, our young people are not the only ones using cellphones while driving. According to a 2010 report from the Pew Research Center, 75% of adults that own a cellphone will drive while using their phone. In fact, NHTSA indicated in a 2013 report that at any time during the day, there are approximately 660,000 drivers using their cellphones or manipulating an electronic device while driving. Unfortunately, our young people may be learning the habit of using their cellphone while driving from older people. Sadly, it appears to be our young people that are most likely to suffer the consequences of that habit.

Despite the tragic consequences, avoiding distracted driving is not difficult. Here are some simple tips:

- Turn off a cellphone or put it out of reach in order to reduce any temptation to respond to an incoming call;
- If you are a passenger in a vehicle, remind the driver of the risks of distracted driving;
- Volunteer to help the driver by handling any calls, text messages, or navigating.

It is important to remember that Minnesota has made it illegal to text, e-mail, or use the internet while driving. In fact, if a driver is under the age of 18 years old, it is illegal for them to use a cellphone at all while driving. The most significant thing that each of us can do is talk to our children, family, and friends about the importance of avoiding distractions while driving in order to safely reach our destination.

