

Driving while distracted leading to more crashes

By Matt Arado | Daily Herald Staff
Contact writer Published 5/6/09

For the most part, living in the suburbs means you have to drive. And driving, it turns out, is dangerous.

Don't believe it? Apparently, we don't.

Law enforcement and safety experts say that in general, we take driving for granted. In other words, we do it without properly acknowledging the hazards involved.

"People get lulled into this sense that they can drive well no matter what distractions exist," said David Teater, senior director of transportation initiatives for the National Safety Council, based in Itasca. "But the truth is that driving is the single most dangerous thing most of us will do on any given day."

What makes it dangerous is that so many of us allow ourselves to be distracted while behind the wheel.

A study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Virginia Tech Transportation Institute showed that simple distractions - talking on a cell phone, reaching for something on the floor, looking too long at something on the side of the road - caused 80 percent of the crashes and 65 percent of the near-crashes observed.

In the best-case scenario, a crash caused by distracted driving results in little more than a dented fender and a hike in your insurance premium. But it can have tragic consequences, as was the case over the weekend when a driver who reportedly had been painting her nails hit and killed a motorcyclist near Lake Zurich.

"You can see cases of distracted driving every day," said Mundelein Police Chief Ray Rose. "This morning on the way to work there was a woman on the road with a dog sitting in her lap. It was hard to tell which one was actually driving the car."

Both Teater and Rose said the growing use of technological devices like cell phones, PDAs and laptops inside cars has reduced drivers' focus even further. The National Safety Council, citing a 2005 Insurance Institute for Highway Safety study, says drivers are four times more likely to be in a crash while using a cell phone, for instance.

"Cell phones are easily the worst source of distraction we have," Teater said.

These days, talking is just one of the functions that people perform with their cell phones. They also send text messages, surf the Internet and check e-mail with them.

Texting while behind the wheel has become so prevalent, in fact, that Illinois and other states are considering banning the practice. **(Virginia Law prohibits texting effective July 1, 2009)**

"I think you have to start somewhere to get on top of distracted driving, and a ban on texting is a great place for that," Rose said. "People who are texting while behind the wheel just have no idea how dangerous that really is."

But laws can do only so much, Rose said. At some point, drivers have to take obvious precautions when they get behind the wheel.

"Otherwise, what would be next? A law that says you can't put on makeup or shave while driving?" he said. "Common sense has to come into play, too."