

Motorists urged to 'park the phone'

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Glen Burnie, MD - Each year, distracted driving results in more than 28,000 injuries on Maryland roads. April is Distracted Driving Awareness Month, and the Maryland Department of Transportation Motor Vehicle Administration (MDOT MVA) Highway Safety Office is working with State and local law enforcement to encourage motorists to Park the Phone before they drive.

"Distracted driving is reported as a factor in nearly 200 fatalities in Maryland every year," said MDOT MVA Administrator Chrissy Nizer, who also serves as Governor Larry Hogan's Highway Safety Representative. "Our Park the Phone campaign educates motorists about the dangers of using a cellphone while driving. Using your cellphone is not worth injuring or killing yourself or someone else."

The Park the Phone campaign includes outreach and education on the dangers of distracted driving via billboards, digital and social media, the web site towardzerodeathsmd.com, and at MDOT MVA branches across the State.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), sending or reading a text takes your eyes off the road for five seconds. When driving 55 mph, those five seconds equate to traveling the length of a football field blindfolded. Distracted driving is especially concerning among younger drivers. According to NHTSA data since 2007, drivers between ages 16 and 24 use handheld electronic devices while driving at higher rates compared to older drivers.

During April, law enforcement statewide will increase enforcement of distracted driving laws, including a joint effort of police officers and sheriffs' deputies in western Maryland and Carroll County.

"Maryland law forbids talking or texting on a handheld device while driving, including while stopped at a traffic light," said Washington County Sheriff Doug Mullendore. "Our goal with this enforcement is to save lives by getting people to Park the Phone before they drive."

In Maryland, fines for using a handheld cellphone while driving are \$83 for the first offense, \$140 for a second offense and \$160 for a third offense. Writing, sending or reading a text or electronic message while driving can result in a \$70 fine and one point on the driver's record. These penalties increase if the use of a device contributes to a crash, serious injury or death.

MDOT MVA offers these safe driving tips:

- * Serve as an example for your family and friends by avoiding distractions while driving.
- * Pull over and park in a safe location if you need to send a text message.
- * Designate a passenger to respond to any messages while you are behind the wheel.
- * Keep our police and other emergency responders safe. MOVE OVER if safe to do so or slow down when approaching a stopped emergency vehicle using visual signals.
- * Save social media for later. Do not use your phone to scroll or engage in social media while driving.
- * Place your cellphone in the trunk, glove box or back seat if you are tempted to use it when driving.
- * Speak up. If your friends or family use their cellphones while driving, ask them to stop.

While cellphone use is a leading cause of distracted driving, there are other interruptions that can be just as harmful, and even deadly, such as eating, applying makeup, changing the radio station or tending to other passengers.

Focusing while driving is one of MDOT MVA's 2019 Top Ten Safety Resolutions. Travelers are encouraged to share this message and commit to safe and responsible driving.

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