

'Buckle Up, Phone Down' campaign begins in region

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Waldorf, MD - Two simple steps—buckling a seat belt and ignoring your cellphone—are going to get some high-profile emphasis in Southern Maryland in the ensuing weeks. An alliance of law enforcement and Maryland's Department of Transportation (MDOT) formally announced the "Buckle Up, Phone Down" campaign for the region Monday, April 22 at the Charles County Sheriff's Office's satellite office in Waldorf.

"Buckling a seat belt only takes three seconds," said Charles County Sheriff Troy Berry, who warned "unbelted passengers can become projectiles in the event of a motor vehicle accident."

Berry was joined at the announcement by his regional counterparts—Sheriff Tim Cameron of St. Mary's and Mike Evans of Calvert, along with MDOT Administrator Chrissy Nizer.

"More than 120 unbelted drivers and passengers are killed every year in Maryland," Nizer stated.

Berry said that between 2013 and 2017 the three Southern Maryland counties combined for just over 800 "unrestrained occupant crashes. He said estimates indicate 46 lives can be saved annually by merely buckling a seatbelt.

The rising prominence of cellular telephones and other hand-held communications devices has created another danger for motorists that local law enforcement will also seek to curb in the upcoming months. Nizer said using a cellphone—calling, texting, etc.—"has legal and financial consequences."

The three sheriffs concurred that enforcement and if, necessary, punitive measures—civil fines and violation notations on driving records—Berry explained that "the key piece is education. That means changing behavior, having a conversation with family members" about using cell phones while driving.

In Maryland, drivers and passengers can be fined \$83 for not wearing a seat belt. Fines for using a hand-held cellphone while driving are \$83 for a first offense, \$140 for a second and \$160 for a third. Writing, sending or reading a text or electronic message while driving can result in a \$70 fine and one point on a motorist's record. The penalties increase if using such devices contributes to a crash, serious injury or death.

"If you look around traffic you see people on their phones," said Cameron, adding that at night the "halo effect" can tip off patrol officers who then will act.

As to how the "Buckle UP, Phone Down" campaign will manifest itself on the region's roads, Sgt. Jason Dean of the Calvert County Sheriff's Office told TheBayNet.com said the issuance of warnings and citations is likely to be displaced with writing citations. Dean also said law enforcement will now have a database to track drivers who are repeat offenders. Acknowledging that deputies, with their technology-equipped patrol vehicles, can also potentially be distracted, Dean conceded, "we need to police ourselves."

According to a MDOT press release, the Buckle Up, Phone Down campaign includes week-long enforcement and education initiatives through August. "During the enforcement waves, information on the dangers of unbelted and distracted driving will be conveyed via billboards, digital and social media, as well as additional outreach.

More information on MDOT's highway safety initiatives can be found by visiting towardzerodeathsmd.com

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