



HIGHLANDS COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

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HCSO to focus on traffic enforcement in effort to highlight aggressive, distracted driving

SEBRING -- Thousands of Highlands County residents drive on U.S. 27 every day. The safety of those drivers and their passengers is a top priority for the Highlands County Sheriff's Office, which is why Sheriff Paul Blackman made increasing traffic enforcement part of his 100-day plan when he was elected in November.

In 2014-15, HCSO records show a total of 2,285 crashes, resulting in 1,576 injuries and 43 fatalities. The majority of those crashes were on U.S. 27.

"We have found that a large portion of those crashes were due to aggressive or distracted driving," Sheriff Paul Blackman said. "Increasing awareness of those issues is the main goal of the increased traffic enforcement program that will begin soon."

In the coming weeks, the HCSO will roll out wolfpack-style operations to target aggressive and distracted driving.

Aggressive driving is anything from speeding and tailgating to actual road rage incidents. While the safety issues involved in aggressive driving are self-apparent, it is what aggressive driving can lead to that is one of the major concerns. A National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study found that:

- 66 percent of traffic fatalities can be attributed to aggressive driving.
- A firearm is involved in 37 percent of aggressive driving incidents.
- Rude gestures, horn honking and other aggressive behavior is responded in kind in at least half of the time.
- Over a seven year period, 218 murders and 12,610 injuries were attributed to road rage.

Distracted driving isn't any better. Studies show that distracted motorists are often more dangerous than drivers who have been drinking. Anything that takes your eyes off the road, your hands off the wheel or your mind off your driving

is distracted driving. Texting and driving is the obvious danger -- and is also illegal -- but the simple act of changing the radio station or turning to talk to a passenger in the back seat can lead to an accident.

According to the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, distracted driving crashes made up more than 12 percent of all crashes (that's more than 45,000 crashes) in Florida in 2015, leading to more than 200 deaths and 39,000 injuries. Drivers ages 20-24 made up the highest number of distracted driving crashes, followed closely by 25- to 29-year-olds and teenagers. Distracted drivers under the age of 30 accounted for more than 12,000 crashes in 2015 and teenagers, who make up just 4.5 percent of drivers, were responsible for 11.7 percent of distracted driving crashes that year.

The goal of the HCSO's increased traffic enforcement program, which will involve patrol units as well as other agency divisions, is to highlight these dangers. While citations will undoubtedly be issued, that is not the goal. In fact, the first week of the program will be focused on issuing warnings rather than tickets. Also, the HCSO will, via social media and other methods, give advanced notification of the areas where the enforcement effort will be focused.

"U.S. 27 will not be the only area of enforcement," Capt. Kenny Johnson, head of the Uniformed Patrol Division said. "We will also target areas where we have had complaints, such as Hammock Road, Lakewood Road and Brunns Road in Sebring. We will be focused on any road with a high volume of traffic and a history of speeding and aggressive driving."

"The main vision for the Sheriff's Office is a safer Highlands County, and making U.S. 27 a safer place for everyone will go a long way toward making that a reality," Sheriff Blackman said. "If we can raise awareness of these issues and prevent just one fatal accident, then the program will have been a huge success."