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For immediate release

Local law enforcement kicks off the holidays with extra DWI patrols

The holiday season is here. And that means parties, get-togethers with friends and loved ones, and toasting the new year. This season, more than ever, if you drink, stay off the roads.

Beginning Thanksgiving Eve, Nov. 23, Rice County law enforcement officers will work additional shifts, looking for impaired and distracted drivers. The additional shifts are paid for with state grant funds.

In the last five years, 49 people were killed on Minnesota roads in drunken driving-related crashes between Thanksgiving Eve and New Year's Eve, the end of the enforcement campaign. A total of 620 alcohol-related traffic deaths have been recorded in the last five years, while 377 people suffered life-changing injuries due to drunken driving crashes.



Of the 143 fatalities or severe injuries in Rice County from 2017-21, 48 were alcohol-related, according to data from the Minnesota Department of Public Safety. That's an average of 10 per year, the 12th highest total in the state. Rice County is the 14th most populous county in Minnesota.

Lonsdale resident Nancy Johnson, who's worked to strengthen laws to reduce impaired driving following the death of her daughter Tina in a drunken driving crash, wants motorists to understand that drunken driving can have lifelong impacts.

"Too many times at sentencing I have heard the defendant in a traffic crash say 'I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt anyone.'," she said. "No one means to cause a crash, but their actions tell a different story. If you drive impaired, distracted or speeding you are just asking to hurt or kill yourself or someone else.

"Do you really want to live with that the rest of your life? Always drive safely like your life depends on it ... because it does."

In addition to drunken driving, officers will be looking for drivers impaired by other substances, including over-the-counter and prescription drugs, and THC-infused edibles and drinks, now legal in Minnesota.

Drugged driving incidents are on the rise in Minnesota, accounting for 6,941 incidents from 2012-16 compared with 15,747 from 2017-21, a 227% increase over a five-year period.

Rice County holds a kickoff event Wednesday evening, prior to the campaign's first patrols. During the event, two officers — Faribault Police officer Jacob Charlton and Rice County Sheriff's deputy Larry Stone — will be honored.

Charlton is being recognized for making 71 DWI arrests during the prior grant year. That's 21 more than last year's honoree and by far the greatest number of DWIs since the county began giving the award in 2016.

Stone will be honored by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety's Office of Traffic Safety for his work while a Mankato officer. Stone was the top DWI Enforcer for that department with 52 DWI arrests in 2021, earning him recognition as a 2022 Minnesota DWI All Star.

Rice County Safe Roads Coalition Coordinator Kathy Cooper asks drivers to plan ahead, adding that if they are going to drink to determine beforehand how they're getting a sober ride home.

"Don't turn this holiday into a reminder of losing someone in a traffic crash," she said.

A DWI is no holiday

- Plan for a safe ride: designate a sober driver, use a safe, alternative transportation option or stay at the location of the celebration.
- Speak up: offer to be a designated driver or be available to pick up a loved one anytime, anywhere. If you see an impaired person about to get behind the wheel, get them a safe ride home.
- If you plan to drive, refrain from drugs, whether legally or illegally obtained.
- Some medications are fine on their own but can impair you when mixed with other medications or alcohol -- even a small amount. Learn about the interactions and talk to your doctor or pharmacist.
- Buckle up: the best defense against an impaired driver.

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