

## Turning Up the Heat

By Cindy Genau

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By now, most of you have probably seen the billboards, heard the radio public service announcements or possibly seen the television commercials for the 2006 “Click It Or Ticket” Campaign which is part of the Office of Highway Safety’s newest campaign entitled, “120 Days of Summer HEAT”. Many of you may have gone through one of the Newark Police, Delaware State Police or other municipal agency seatbelt checkpoints being conducted as part of the campaign. If so, I say good! We all can use a reminder to buckle up especially as we move into Memorial Day weekend and the start of the summer travel season. Seatbelt usage increases your chances of preventing injury and increases your chance of survival by 50% in a motor vehicle crash. Because I listen to the morning traffic radio report, I know that your chances of getting in a crash are pretty good just about any day of the week. I think every day there is a crash or two reported somewhere in New Castle County.

If you haven’t heard of “Click It Or Ticket”, it is a local and national high visibility media awareness campaign coupled with intensive enforcement by police agencies of the primary seatbelt law in Delaware and across the country. The true goal of the campaign is not to just write citations but to truly save lives and reduce injuries from motor vehicle crashes by increasing the number of Delawareans who consistently buckle up. The seatbelt usage rate in Delaware is at an all time high of 84%, but still 1 in every 6 Delawareans fails to buckle up regularly. Last year 133 people were killed on our roadways due to crashes, and 8,367 were injured in motor vehicle crashes.

The primary seatbelt law requires everyone in the car to be buckled up, but I still see way too many teen drivers, and passengers not buckled up. I actually conduct some of the state seatbelt observation studies. As I view vehicles on the roadway to check to see who is buckled up or not, I also notice that many pick up truck drivers are not wearing their seatbelts. Other national studies tell us that night time drivers and passengers fail to wear their seatbelt and 71% of those killed in nighttime crashes are unrestrained. This is at the same time when driving is more of a risk because we know more impaired drivers are on the road at night. The driver is responsible for making sure that everyone in the car is buckled and will be the one to receive the fine for any unbuckled passenger, which is a \$25.00 fine plus an additional \$15.00 in court costs.

Most people are worried about the number of crimes in their neighborhood to know if they will be safe. But in Delaware and nationally, there are more people killed by motor vehicle crashes than by crime. In Delaware, we have one murder every 9 days and one death due to a traffic fatality every 2 ¾ days. Many times I hear people say that police officers should spend more time on solving crimes rather than giving traffic citations. Well, I have two answers to that. First, traffic violations such as speeding, aggressive driving, running red lights and not being buckled up are against the law. The police

officers did not write the laws but it is their job to enforce them. So if you choose to break the law by ignoring the legally posted speed limit or not buckling up, there are consequences and you are given a traffic arrest by a police officer who is doing his job. His job is to keep you safe because speeding leads to crashes and using seatbelts will increase your chance of survival or prevent serious injuries. You are arrested, but are not handcuffed and taken to jail. But you have broken the law and are given a traffic arrest. Secondly, making traffic arrests is one of the best tools officers have for solving crimes. The "Click It Or Ticket" statistics for May 18, 2006 show that while there were 784 seatbelt arrests, there were also 7 wanted persons apprehended, 19 stolen vehicles recovered, 4 drug arrests, 2 DUI arrests, 18 child restraint arrests, and 225 other traffic arrests. So officers, just by making routine traffic stops, are catching wanted criminals and getting drugs off the streets. Something I think all of us know will help make our neighborhoods a safer place to live and travel in.

But the "Click It or Ticket" campaign is only the first of three major traffic safety campaigns to be conducted throughout the summer. The overall campaign is called "120 Days of Summer HEAT" (Highway Enforcement of Aggressive Traffic). So police officers and their agencies will be cracking down on traffic violators and non-seatbelt usage all summer long. Summer is the time when traffic fatalities seem to peak, so by stopping aggressive driving and making sure everyone is buckled up, they hope to keep you and your family safe and injury free while you enjoy summer travel. Be safe and buckle up everyone, every ride and every time.