

Not wearing seatbelt is costly crime

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Failure to wear seatbelts is one of the costliest crimes in Montana, a consultant told a group of law enforcement officials Thursday.

Speaking at the second annual Montana Crime Prevention Conference sponsored by the Montana Board of Crime Control, Joe Colella of Maryland said Montana's taxpayers, employers and communities underwrite the cost of auto wrecks, emergency response, investigations and treatment of injured people, among other costs.

"Traffic accidents cost more in lives, injuries and money than any crime in Montana," Colella said. "You end up paying in lots of ways."

Colella closed the three-day conference by telling several dozen officers and other officials from across the state that a three-pronged approach is needed to increase the use of seatbelts — legislation, education and enforcement, he said.

He noted that of 217 people who died in autos in Montana in 2007, nearly three-quarters were not buckled in. That percentage stays fairly steady over time, in 751 of the 1,063 fatalities over the last five years the victims were not wearing seatbelts.

Colella noted that Montana is a "secondary enforcement" state when it comes to seatbelt use, meaning that officers can't stop a driver simply if the driver is seen without a seatbelt. He said states with secondary enforcement have a fatality rate that's 23 percent above those states with primary enforcement, and that seatbelt use is 12 percent higher in primary states.

He also pointed out that Montana is the only state in the country that doesn't have primary enforcement of child restraint laws, meaning a police officer can't pull over a parent if he sees an unbuckled 3-year-old.

"The law coverage in Montana isn't good enough," he said.

Colella, who took up the cause when his 3-year-old niece was killed in a car wreck in 1994, said that stricter seatbelt laws have met resistance in the last couple of legislative sessions.

"The people who don't want the laws are loud, and they call their legislators and complain," he said. "The people who want the laws don't call."

The 18-member Board of Crime Control, appointed by the governor, works with law enforcement agencies of all levels across the state. Among other things, the board administers grants for various crime prevention programs, according to Mark Thatcher, the board's public safety bureau chief.

Thatcher said officers, educators, faith-based professionals and individuals all attended the conference.

"We're starting to build regional crime prevention strategies and engage communities to take control," he said. "What we're trying to do is focus on workshops and training that give people the tools they need to go out into communities and start to address those needs."

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