

New program will target dangerous roads

Dana Beyerle (Montgomery Bureau Chief)

MONTGOMERY | A new state-wide push for road safety is slated to start Oct. 1, but troopers won't be on the roads just to write tickets and investigate accidents.

Chris Murphy, director of the Department of Public Safety, said the new statewide safety campaign is designed to prevent accidents, rather than react to them after they've occurred.

"What we're trying to do, other than having a knee-jerk reaction in where we put people out there and write tickets, is we'll look at crashes and where they happen and what causes them," Murphy said in a recent interview.

State officials are studying road traffic data not released to the public, including specific sections of roads and highways where accidents are more frequent.

But available information shows some roads clearly are more dangerous than others, including Interstate 20/59 through Tuscaloosa, Greene and Sumter counties and Alabama Highway 216 in Tuscaloosa County.

The Alabama Department of Transportation releases only general accident information for counties because of concerns over lawsuits, ALDOT attorney James Ippolito said, so the exact locations of wrecks and fatalities aren't readily available.

"Federal law allows us to protect that specific information," he said.

Officials with the Department of Public Safety and ALDOT said a combination of law enforcement's knowledge of traffic hot spots along with internal accident and fatality statistics will guide their safety efforts.

Some of the most dangerous roads are in rural areas, where speeding, late-night driving and greater distances from life-saving emergency care contribute to the number of deaths.

The CARE Research and Development Laboratory at the University of Alabama will use Department of Transportation numbers to help troopers identify problem areas. CARE stands for Critical Analysis Reporting Environment.

"We have software to analyze crash data and load the raw data into our base," said Rhonda Stricklin, assistant research engineer at CARE.

Murphy said the Department of Public Safety will use statistics and trooper input to determine the best use of trooper patrols.

“It doesn’t mean we aren’t going to patrol other roads,” he said. “We’re trying to reduce fatalities and this is another step in systematically looking at it.”

ALDOT has a \$5.6 million federal grant to provide overtime pay for volunteer trooper patrols on major highways for two years.

Murphy said driver error, inattention, and excess speed, not to mention impaired driving, often combine with a dangerous road to cause accidents.

A combination of enforcement and construction fixes may be needed for some roads, he said.

Waymon Benifield, the safety administrator for the Department of Transportation, identified highways that could be part of the safety campaign.

In most cases, roads with higher traffic volumes are more likely to have accidents, he said.

Among the most dangerous roads in West Alabama are Interstate 20/59 and Alabama 216, which runs through eastern Tuscaloosa County, between Tuscaloosa and the Jefferson County line.

I-20/59 in Greene and Sumter counties had 495 accidents and 22 fatalities between Jan. 1, 2005, and mid-September, for a fatality-to-accident ratio of one fatality for every 23 accidents. On I-20/59 in Tuscaloosa County, there were 24 fatalities and 1,535 accidents, an interstate fatality-to-accident ratio of 1 to 64.

Alabama Hwy 216 had five fatalities and 223 accidents between Jan. 1, 2005 and mid-September. That amounts to a relatively high ratio of one fatality per 45 wrecks.

Dee Rowe, the Department of Transportation division engineer for the area including Tuscaloosa County, said Alabama 216 will be getting design changes in an attempt to modernize parts of the road built in the last century when driving occurred at a much slower, less distracted pace.

Rowe said comments gleaned from public meetings held about three weeks ago will be used to help engineers decide how high-priority project money will be spent on the 28-mile highway.

“We are currently using some of the funds for the corridor study and will use the remaining as soon as we have plans ready,” she said.

Although Alabama Hwy 69 in Tuscaloosa County had more fatalities than 216 during the same period -- Hwy 69 had eight -- there were 1,192 accidents on the road, for a fatality-to-accident ratio of 1 to 124.

Seven fatalities and 1,411 accidents occurred on U.S. 11 in Tuscaloosa County, but there were none on the portion of U.S. 11 through Greene County since Jan. 1, 2005.

In Fayette County, Alabama 171 (including the combined U.S. 43) had three fatalities and 267 accidents since Jan. 1, 2005, for a fatality-to-accident ratio of 1 to 89.

In Greene County, there were four fatalities and 87 accidents on U.S. 43.