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Garland's teen drivers show significant safety improvements

GARLAND – Safer driving habits for Garland teenagers have helped to sharply reduce fatal crashes in the community, according to a recent case study.

Researchers from the Teens in the Driver Seat Center of the Texas Transportation Institute reviewed both driver behavior and crash statistics in Garland and Mesquite during two periods: from 2002 through 2005, and 2006 through 2009. While both cities experienced improvements during the study period, those in Garland were more dramatic:

- The number of teen crash fatalities in Garland dropped from 9 to 1. The number in Mesquite fell from 4 to 2.
- The percentage of all crashes that involved a teen driver in Garland dropped from 28 percent to 16 percent. In Mesquite, that percentage fell from 24 percent to 22 percent.

In addition, Garland teens also demonstrated higher seat belt use and lower cell phone use behind the wheel than their counterparts in Mesquite.

The researchers attribute the improvements to a combination of two factors: the state's graduated driver license (GDL) law – which places restrictions on drivers for the first year that they hold a license – and the Teens in the Driver Seat (TDS) Program, which is designed to reinforce the GDL law through peer influence. The TDS Program has been active in Garland's seven high schools since 2006, whereas the program is not active in Mesquite.

"The GDL law gives us an essential foundation," said State Rep. Joe Driver, one of the original authors of the law. "But the law can be made more effective by creative efforts like Teens in the Driver Seat. Together, they give us a one-two punch that works very well."

The GDL in Texas, originally passed in 2002, prohibited teenage drivers from carrying more than one passenger under the age of 21 or driving between midnight and 5 a.m. The Legislature strengthened the law twice since then, adding a cell phone restriction in 2005 and extending the restriction period from six months to 12 months in 2009.

Garland high schools in 2006 started the Teens in the Driver Seat Program, a teen-led initiative that emphasizes the dangers most common to young drivers: driving at night, cell phone use / texting, speeding, low seat belt use, and alcohol. The program also relies on teens to develop and deliver safety messages to each other. Driver behavior and crash trends in Garland were compared through last year with those in Mesquite, which hasn't started the TDS program and experienced more modest safety improvements by comparison.

Mesquite teens did, however, show an increase in seat belt use, from 75 percent in 2008 to 81 percent in 2009. Officials give credit for that increase to the Texas Department of Transportation's annual Click it or Ticket seat belt campaign, which for the first time focused on teen drivers and passengers. Researchers expect Click it or Ticket to push seat belt usage rates even higher for teens in future years.

The case study results show that the best results come from a coordinated approach involving public policy and peer influence.

"TTI has worked for years to better understand this problem, and now we know more than we ever have about how to address it," TTI Director Dennis Christiansen said. "We're committed to continued research and innovations to help fight the number-one killer of teenagers in America."

TDS is available at no cost to Texas high schools through funding support from the Texas Department of Transportation, the Texas Transportation Institute, and State Farm.

"Garland's involvement in the Teens in the Driver Seat program is important for the safety of our youth," Garland Mayor Ronald E. Jones said. "I am particularly pleased with the leadership demonstrated by members of the Garland Youth Council as they work with the Garland ISD high schools to spread these vital safety messages to their peers."