

Police have an eye out for drunks

Saturation patrols, checkpoints due for holidays

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Holiday season means party season, and party season means more drunken driving.

"We know we're going to be busier because of people being stupid," said Lt. Jack Amrhein, an emergency medical technician assigned to the Fullerton fire station.

A resident of Perry Hall, Amrhein treats the aftermath of the stupidity -- people injured and killed in accidents caused by impaired drivers.

Amrhein rides the ambulances that go out to crash scenes.

"The thing that gets me is that the victims are totally innocent," he said. "Sometimes the victim wasn't even in a moving car, but stopped at a light."

Statistics show that the number of crashes involving alcohol rises between Thanksgiving and New Year's.

"Absolutely, they increase," said Ernie Lehr, a civilian and coordinator of Community Traffic Safety for the county police department.

While Amrhein and his co-workers on ambulances confront the worst consequences, others work during the holidays to prevent them.

The county police department has a DUI Task Force of five members that does "saturation patrols" at locations where partygoers and bars are common, said Cpl. Todd Walker, who supervises the unit.

The task force also patrols in neighborhoods where Maryland State Police are holding checkpoints -- places where all motorists are stopped by officers looking for drunken drivers.

Walker explained that, due to a Supreme Court ruling that requires drivers approaching a checkpoint to be informed and have a route around the checkpoint, nearby streets can produce many violators.

Police are on the lookout for drivers who avoid the checkpoint and who drive erratically.

"We look for people running stop signs, going the wrong way on streets, weaving around," said officer Phil Winkler, a member of the unit.

Task force officers are on "permanent midnight" duty, Walker said, meaning they work 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. five days a week.

Peak season is starting earlier now.

"Halloween is becoming a really dangerous night," he said.

Why do members volunteer for the unit?

Walker said he believes the task force, stricter penalties and more education are having an impact.

Winkler said he is convinced he is preventing major injuries and death.

"That gives me a real sense of satisfaction," he said.

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