Local Issue – Distracted Driving

Problem Identification

The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority Police Department has committed itself to the enforcement and increasing of public awareness of distracted driving laws. The Commonwealth of Virginia does have a primary offense texting while driving law, driving with earphones, as well as failure to pay full time and attention laws. Our department considers distracted driving a top priority of our enforcement efforts. Although it is difficult for our officers to secure a court conviction for texting due to the way the law was written, our officers continue to enforce and educate the public about the laws and the dangers involved in distracted driving.

Each year, the MWAA Police Department conducts a review to assess how many crashes involved distracted drivers as well as the locations of these incidents. During 2015, our agency had 93 fatality and injury crashes, and of those, 46 were identified as having distracted driving as a contributing factor. Because of these findings, our agency considers distracted driving a top priority of our traffic enforcement mission and works during routine patrol and special enforcement details to enforce and educate the public about distracted driving.

It was discovered during research that the majority of our distracted driving crashes occurred during morning and evening rush hours. Many drivers travelling in heavy congestion can become distracted by cell phones, car radios, books. This highly increases the likelihood of being involved in a crash. Typical regional rush hours are Monday thru Friday from 0600 to 1000 hours in the morning and 1500 to 1900 hours in the evening.

In an effort to ensure officer safety, MWAA PD policy directs that officers shall not use wireless communication devices while operating a vehicle in motion, unless they have hands free capability, and even then they are directed to keep the calls relevant and brief. Officers are also directed that they shall not use in-car computers while they are driving a vehicle that is in motion.

Our agency goal was to reduce injury and fatality crashes by 10% over the previous year's crashes. We also set a goal of conducting at least 5 dedicated enforcement and education efforts that were independent of routine patrol activities during the year.

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Policy

The MWAA PD has a policy in place directing that police officers shall not use wireless communication devices while operating a vehicle in motion unless they have hands free capability, and even then they are directed to keep the calls brief. Although the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority Police Department does not have a specific reference in General Orders, we consider distracted driving a top priority of our department.

Below is the portion of the Department General Orders referencing seatbelt use by the officers:

4-100.01 POLICY

Departmental vehicles shall be used with the utmost care and due regard for safety, in the furtherance of official business, and in compliance with the policies of the Department, regulations of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, and the laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia. All employees shall drive Airports Authority vehicles in a safe and prudent manner at all times.

4-100.04 WIRELESS COMMUNICATIONS DEVICES

Department personnel shall minimize or eliminate anything that will divert their attention from the road while their vehicle is moving. The speakerphone function or a hands free device should be used while talking on a phone when the vehicle is in motion. Department personnel shall not use the texting function of any wireless communications device while operating a vehicle in motion. All calls should be brief and should be postponed when driving in heavy traffic. Department personnel shall not use phones or pagers to bypass the radio when communicating work related information (i.e., requests for back up, meal breaks, or need for assistance). Laptop computers will not be operated by the driver while the vehicle is in motion.

4-111.01 POLICY

It is the policy of the Police Department to provide for safe, orderly vehicular and pedestrian traffic flow within its jurisdiction. The Department will accomplish this through a multi-prong approach to include traffic direction and control, fair and unbiased enforcement of traffic laws, and addressing roadway hazards.

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Policy (continued)

These policies support efforts to reduce distracted driving within our jurisdiction by instructing officers not use electronic devices when their patrol vehicle is in motion, expect in extreme and exigent circumstances. It also directs officers to ensure the safe travel and orderly vehicular traffic within our jurisdiction, which includes preventing distracted driving.

Planning

Each year traffic safety is conducted by the police during their routine patrols or during special enforcement efforts. The special enforcement details are planned and coordinated through the Dulles Toll Road Office of the Police Department, and are usually coordinated in relation to local, state and national campaigns.

Example of distracted driving poster placed at exit door to remind airport employees to not drive distracted before getting into their vehicle and increase awareness.

The department conducted five different enforcement efforts in support of our goal of enforcement and increasing of public awareness of impaired driving laws. Enforcement efforts

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Planning (continued)

range from participating in distracted driving campaigns, to assigning patrol units to go out during target timeframes, on target days, to concentrate enforcement efforts on distracted drivers. Our agency developed a plan to use routine patrols to locate and stop distracted drivers as well as stationary positions to identify this issue. A main focus area was the Dulles Toll Road during morning and evening rush hours since statistics showed this timeframe to be when the majority of distracted driving crashes involved an injury or fatality.

The department evaluated trends in crashes to look for increases of injuries or fatalities associated with distracted driving and adjusted enforcement and education plans based on these findings. Police supervisors then reviewed crash data after enforcement efforts to gauge the effect the details.

Example of Distracted Driving posters placed around the airport community to increase awareness.

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Training

During 2015, seventeen recruits received academy training on distracted driving during courses such as Crash Investigation, Motor Vehicle Traffic Laws and Emergency Vehicle Operations. Our agency conducted roll call training for all officers during 2015 on distracted laws within the Commonwealth of Virginia, to include texting, wearing earphones, and failure to pay full time and attention.

Our agency also conducted roll call training pertaining to legal updates involving distracted driving laws. This training explained different ways to identify distracted drivers and reviewed pamphlets that our agency obtained to dispense out and educate the public.

Public Information and Education

During 2015, the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority Police Department used many different ways to inform and educate the public about the dangers of distracted driving. Our department participated in distracted driving campaigns and attended multiple events where they were able to educate the community on the dangers of distracted driving. Some of these events were the Special Olympics Dulles Day Plane Pull Event which occurred on

Lt. John Balser checks for distracted drivers passing through one the Dulles Toll Road toll booths during a morning rush hour.

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Public Information and Education (continued)

September 19th from 1030 to 1600 hours. There was strong participation by MWAA PD to educate airport employees during multiple Authority events, including the Dulles International Airport Health fair on November 3rd, 2015 from 1130 to 1530 hours, as well as numerous Airport Job Fairs.

The Airports Authority Police Department utilized variable message boards to remind the public of ongoing traffic safety initiatives and campaigns. Multiple variable message boards were placed around the jurisdiction displaying "Do Not Text and Drive, It's the Law" and "Distracted Driving Enforcement Underway" messages to increase public awareness. These message boards focused on target areas identified through crash data to ensure maximum exposure to the members of the public most likely to be driving distracted. Variable message boards were positioned in strategic locations and moved to different sites to produce the maximum exposure to the public. We also were able to arrange to have the "Distracted Driving" campaign messages displayed on other variable message boards on Airports Authority roadways to increase the public's exposure to this message. We are able to have these messages displayed due to our partnerships with Airport Operations and with the Airport manager.

Sgt. Karen Cole, a member of our Community Liaison Program, informs and educates the public about distracted driving at the Special Olympics Dulles Day Plane Pull community event.

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Enforcement

The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority Police Department conducted its enforcement by conducting routine patrols and conducting special enforcement efforts. This included positioning officers at exit ramps and toll booths to check for violations as well as conducting saturation patrols to locate distracted driver violations. During 2015, the Airports Authority Police Department issued 357 distracted driving related summonses. Our department accomplished this during over 25,000 hours of special details, routine patrols and saturation efforts, all without the use of any grant-funded overtime. Our department also participated in the national distracted driving campaigns and during this enforcement effort officers issued 21 summonses for various distracted driving violations. Police officers also had 72 educational contacts during the five special details that were organized by the agency.

Ofc. Etro stops a vehicle for texting while driving, in an effort to increase the public's awareness about distracted driving.

During enforcement efforts, officers enforced violations that included texting while driving, use of earphones while driving, failure to pay full time and attention, as well as some other violations that were associated with distracted driving. Of the 357 summonses issued for distracted driving, 251 were issued within identified target locations during target timeframes. We also are aware of at least another 150 contacts that were educational in nature for distracted driving, with approximately 130 of those being within our target area during the target timeframe.

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Outcomes

Due to continual efforts of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority Police Department, we have experienced regular decreases in the number of crashes involving fatality or injury due to distracted driving. In 2015, we only experienced one fatality crash which involved the driver being distracted. We have been able to maintain two or less fatalities each year for the last four years, which we attribute in part to our continued efforts to enforce and educate the public about distracted driving. The effectiveness of our education and enforcement efforts was determined through follow-up evaluation of crash data that confirmed a decrease in crashes involving distracted drivers.

We had a decrease of injury crashes involving vehicles with distracted drivers. In 2015, there was 93 injury crashes with 46 involving a distracted driver, which is 49.5% of reported injury crashes. In 2014, we had 67 injury crashes with 48 involving a distracted driver, which is 71.6% of reported injury crashes. Due to our distracted driving enforcement efforts, we experienced a 22.1% drop in injury crashes involving a distracted driver.

Cpl. Daniel Cornwell
54 distracted driving related summons issued during 2015

Cpl. Uwemedimo Eshietedoho
25 distracted driving related summons issued during 2015

Cpl. Melanie Zinger
21 distracted driving related summons issued during 2015

Cpl. Christian Coleman
20 distracted driving related summons issued during 2015

Cpl. Gregory Belden
14 distracted driving related summons issued during 2015

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Outcomes (continued)

During 2015, our department also set a goal to decrease injury crashes involving distracted drivers by 10% within our jurisdiction. We were able to meet this goal, by decreasing the percentage of injury crashes involving distracted drivers by 22.1%, which we can relate to our continued efforts to enforce distracted driving laws and educate the public. We also met our goal of conducting five special enforcement details during the year. These efforts also produced additional benefits such as alcohol and drug related charges, arrests of suspended and revoked drivers and arrests of wanted persons. Due to our efforts, multiple compliments were received from members of the public recognizing our officer's efforts in dealing with impaired drivers.

Example of one of the Variable Message Board Signs used for Distracted Driving Awareness