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UNPRECEDENTED PARTNERSHIP IMPROVES BICYCLE SAFETY

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By Kerry Kerster

Three bicyclists have been injured on Route 1 in recent weeks. One rider, a Lithuanian woman who was the victim of a hit-and-run crash, sustained a serious head injury and was comatose at Christiana Hospital for a couple of weeks; she was recently upgraded to fair condition. A Polish woman sustained a fractured skull when she was struck from behind while riding her bicycle on the shoulder of Route 1. She and her companion, who was also struck and sustained minor injuries, will recover. Whether the Lithuanian woman has permanent brain damage is questionable.

The number of bicycle-related crashes during the summer months has increased during the last couple of years, said Delaware State Police Troop 7 Deputy Cmdr. Lt. Ron Hagan. "We've also seen a significant increase in the number of bicyclist, with the majority being foreign students who come here to work for the summer."

Members of the state and private organizations, the health-care field and private industry have partnered to try and reduce the number of bike-related injuries and fatalities with an educational and law enforcement program. Representatives from several groups conducted a bicycle safety outreach event, July 17, at Ocean Atlantic Associates on Route 1. In under two hours they distributed more than 80 free bicycle helmets and dozens of strobe reflector lights, glow sticks, bracelets and safety brochures.

"Most of the bicycle-related fatalities are from head injuries," said Ron Jester, University of Delaware extension specialist. "A two-foot freefall of the head can result in permanent brain damage."

"Each time the patient has an impact the brain is slammed in the skull," said Glenn Marshall, Sussex Emergency Medical Services (EMS) public information officer.

The two predominant dangers of head injuries, he explained, are bleeding and swelling. "Your skull is a closed space," he said. "There's only so much room in there, so once the brain swells and reaches the capacity of space in the skull, something has to give. The pressure has to be released somehow."

As with cardiac cases, he explained, cases involving head injuries are time sensitive – not only because of a potential fatality but also because how quickly a head injury is treated can affect the long-term outcome. "The more time the brain is pressured, the less likely it is there will be a positive outcome," said Marshall.

Nerve damage is often a complication of head injuries, but there are other things people should consider when they take the risk of sustaining head injuries by not wearing a helmet, he said. "The brain is the regulatory center for your body," said Marshall. "Therefore, not just the brain itself is affected by a head injury – the results go beyond that."

“It can affect all major organs and/or other body functions, to the point of death. Brain injuries can lead to long-term disabilities that then affected a person’s work, finances, family, relationships and emotions. “It’s something that affects far more than just the patient,” said Marshall. “It affects the whole family – everyone in the at person’s life.”

When Ocean Atlantic Associates President Preston Schell learned the three bicycle crashes on Route 1 involved foreign students who worked here in the summer, he decided to try to help promote their safety by donating helmets to them. He and Kathleen Schlaff, Ocean Atlantic spokeswomen, canvassed area stores and bought as many helmets as they could; then ordered more from the internet.

On one shopping excursion, they were in line with two shopping carts loaded with dozens of helmets when a little boy yanked his mother’s sleeve and said: “Mommy, those people sure must have a lot of kids!”

Ocean Atlantic Associates has spent approximately \$1,500 on more than 150 helmets and has ordered more, including child-size helmets. The company also took orders at the outreach event for families seeking bike helmets for children.

Products distributed by state police were funded by the Office of Emergency Medical Services, which falls under the auspices of the Department of Public Health. The troop began the educational component of its bicycle safety campaign several weeks ago, when officers started stopping bicyclists without helmets and distributing bicycle safety brochures with area business, particularly those they know foreign students frequent.

“Our main focus was to get the educational material out,” said Hagen. “Now we’re in the enforcement phase.” Troopers are now stopping and citing bicyclist who disobey traffic laws. There are numerous laws that pertain to bicycling. For example, bicycles must have lights if they are ridden at night, and bicyclists may not wear devices covering their ears, such as Walkmans or ear plugs. It is also illegal for bicyclists to ride their bikes while under the influence of alcohol or drugs or to carry anything that prevents them from using both hands to operate the bike.

Delaware law requires bicyclists under the age of 16 to wear helmets, but police hope all bicyclists will wear helmets, regardless if the law mandates it. “The three bicyclists who got hit here – none of them had helmets on, and two had serious head injuries,” Hagen said at the recent Neighborhood Watch meeting. Last year, the cyclists were at fault in the majority of the crashes, he noted. This year, however, motorists have caused the crashes.

Some patrol officers will keep helmets in their cars to distribute to bicyclist they encounter during their shifts. Additionally, helmets are available at the troop. Ocean Atlantic Associates is also continuing its giveaway program and has helmets in the office at the corner of Route 1 and Bay Vista Road. For more information, call Troop 7 at 644-5020 or Ocean Atlantic at 227-3573.

The newly formed Sussex County Bicycle Task Force, Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) and local chambers of commerce are also participating in the county’s campaign to improve cyclist safety.

The Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) provided funding for the safety brochures that provide information on the basic laws pertaining to bike riding and where bicycle maps are available. The brochures were distributed at the summer job fair in Rehoboth Beach in early spring, real estate rental agents are distributing them in their

packet of information for renters, hospitals have them available in their waiting rooms, and chambers of commerce have them available to visitors. The Rehoboth Beach – Dewey Beach Chamber of Commerce has brochures translated into Russian and Polish, available at the chamber office in The Grove Park at Columbia Avenue and Grove Street in Rehoboth Beach.

The task force is composed of representatives from the following agencies and institutions: Beebe Medical Center; Sussex EMS; Delaware Bicycle Council, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Rural Health Program; DHHS Trauma System Development Program; Delaware Safe Kids, Sussex County chapter; University of Delaware Cooperative Extension; Lewes Chamber of Commerce; Delaware State Police; DelDOT; and the Delaware Office of Highway Safety.



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