



SURGEON GENERAL, STATE OF ARKANSAS

JOSEPH W. THOMPSON, MD, MPH

NEWS RELEASE

February 23, 2009

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STATE LEADERS WANT REDUCTION IN PREVENTABLE DEATH AND DISABLING INJURY

Injury is the leading cause of death for Arkansans between age 1 and 44 and motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among teens.

LITTLE ROCK—As progress is made toward establishing a much needed Arkansas trauma system, health, law-enforcement, emergency responders, policymakers, injury prevention leaders and families joined forces to promote two additional key steps in reducing preventable injury-related fatality and disability.

During a news conference today hosted by Arkansas Surgeon General, Joseph W. Thompson, MD, MPH, evidence developed through the Arkansas Health Data Initiative was presented showing the number of Arkansas lives that could be saved by a primary seat belt law and graduated drivers licensing for teens.

In 2006, hospitalization following a traffic crash occurred ten-times more frequently for unbelted drivers compared to those who were belted during a crash. When it comes to the cost of not wearing a seat belt, crash-related hospitalization charges were 15.5 times higher for unbelted drivers—\$2.7 million for every 1,000 unbelted drivers versus \$174,000 for every 1,000 drivers wearing a seat belt in a crash.

Further, evidence shows that the rate of crashes for teen drivers is much higher than the rate for adults, with approximately 19 percent of licensed 16-year-old drivers crashing compared to less than 8 percent of 25-year-old drivers. Fatality rates for drivers age 16-19 years are 4 times higher than drivers ages 25-69.

Pointing to a wrecked car used as a visual reminder of the tragedy of traffic crashes, Dr. Thompson said, “This wreckage is a grim reminder of the 3,528 people who lost their lives in motor vehicle crashes in Arkansas between 2001 and 2006. Sixty-four percent of the people who

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died were not wearing a seat belt.” He added, “Unfortunately, too often wreckage like this involves as many as 158 teen drivers aged 14 to 17 who are involved in a traffic crash every week in our state. Another 3,000 disabling injuries are sustained by Arkansans each year from traffic crashes.”

“Arkansas’s injury death rate is 31 percent higher than the national average. A state-wide trauma system will reduce the number of deaths by 25 percent. But, it would be penny-wise and pound foolish to stop at that when we could see another 5 percent reduction in deaths through a primary seat belt law and a 30 percent reduction in deaths of 16 and 17 year old drivers through graduated drivers licensing. This could be accomplished with no cost.”

Using the National Safety Council Injury Cost Model, the Arkansas Department of Health estimates that over time three prevention steps will result in a combined cost savings of \$237 million (Trauma System - \$193 million, Primary Seat Belt Law - \$37 million, and Graduated Drivers Licensing - \$7 million).

Joining Dr. Thompson in demonstrating the need for a primary seat belt law and graduated drivers licensing were: Representative George Overbey who credits wearing a seat belt with saving his life during a recent traffic crash that totaled the pick up truck he was driving; and Arkansas State Police Director, Colonel Winford E. Phillips, who talked about the needless tragedy seen every day by State Troopers responding to traffic crashes where an unbelted driver died as a result of being thrown from a crashed vehicle or a teen driver suffered permanently disabling injury because of a crash caused by inexperience and distraction.

Mary Aitken, MD, MPH, Director of the Arkansas Children’s Hospital Injury Prevention Center credited the Arkansas Center for Health Improvement with providing new evidence to show how great the problem is. She said, “The new Arkansas-specific data released today as part of the Arkansas Health Data Initiative provide even more compelling evidence that Arkansas teens are at extreme risk when they are behind the wheel of a car. Most other states have graduated driver licensing policies in place and have seen decreases in teen driver deaths by, on average, about 20 percent. Arkansas can protect its teens better from this leading killer by instituting a law which will help novice drivers learn to drive under the safest circumstances.”

Dr. Thompson closed by thanking the Arkansas Senate for passing Senate Bill 309 which addresses graduated drivers licensing and Senate Bill 78 which would implement a primary seat belt law. Both bills are now headed to the Arkansas House of Representatives for action.

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Sponsors of Senate Bill 309 are Senators J. Jeffress, Altes, Bledsoe, Bryles, Crumbly, Elliot, Glover, Hendren, G. Jeffress, D. Johnson, Miller, R. Thompson, Trusty, H. Wilkins, Wilkinson and D. Wyatt, and Representatives Shelby, Adcock, Allen, Blount, Cheatham, J. Edwards, English, Harrelson, Hoyt, W. Lewellen, Maxwell, Nix, J. Roebuck, Saunders, Summers, Tyler, Webb and Wills.

Senate Bill 78 is sponsored by Senators H. Wilkins, Elliott, Crumbly and Steele, and Representatives Allen, T. Baker, Word, Rainey, Davis, W. Lewellen, Carroll, Williams and Blount.

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