Teen driver safety program looks to engage students and save lives

All it takes sometimes is a second of distraction fiddling with a cell phone or iPod behind the wheel to propel a driver into a serious, life-altering car accident. In a society as technologically geared up as ours, with every manner of electronic and mechanical gadgetry at our fingertips, driver distraction is becoming a very real issue. And the greatest offenders, it's no surprise, are those with the least amount of driving experience: teenagers.

Statistics show that motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for 16- to 19-year-olds, accounting for 40 percent of all teen deaths. The Impact Teen Drivers Fund was created as a nonprofit awareness and education program to bring attention to teen driving behaviors and choices. The idea for the Impact Teen Drivers campaign came about through a partnership that includes educators, the California Association of Highway Patrolmen, California Casualty and CTA, among others.

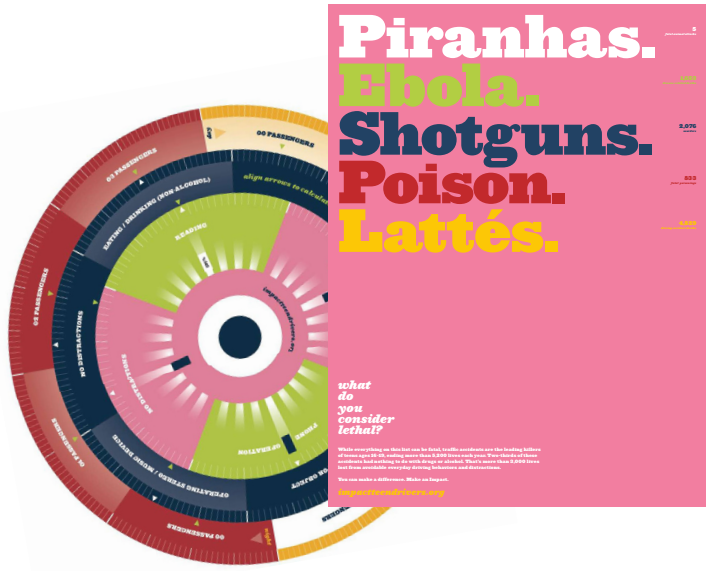
Says George Bowen, senior vice president of California Casualty, "We realized that we were in a position to truly make a difference by bringing these groups together in a way that had not been done before to provide a life-saving message to teens."

Impact classroom materials will be distributed to all California public high schools prior to March 9, the beginning of Teen Driving Safety Week as proclaimed in a legislative resolution introduced by Assembly Member Mike Eng (Monterey Park) and state Senator Alan Lowenthal (Long Beach).

Sophomore classes will be given Impact material packets, which includes a poster series to display in classrooms, and a DVD with several mini documentaries about the real impact and consequences of distracted driving and an interactive "probability wheel" that calculates the increased risk or certain distracted driving behaviors. The program also reaches out to teens through viral messaging channels, including MySpace, Facebook and a blog.

"Our teachers have the greatest access to teen drivers," says David A. Sanchez, president of CTA. "We can make a real difference and save lives by educating our students about safe and unsafe driving habits. It is imperative that we deliver this message to California's teens."

The materials provided to teachers were specifically designed with the intention to engage teenagers and speak to them from their perspective. "What do you consider lethal?" posters encourage teens to see the correlation between clearly lethal agents — like cobras, floods, cancer, guns — and activities that are seemingly harmless — like texting, eating and applying make-up. The word puzzles demonstrate how otherwise harmless acts can become deadly when mixed with driving a vehicle.



Impact poster gets teens thinking about how otherwise harmless acts can become deadly when mixed with driving a vehicle. The probability wheel calculates a students' chances of being in an accident due to driver distraction.

Also included in teacher packets is the accident probability wheel, which calculates how certain everyday activities affect a teen driver's chances of being in an accident. Using DMV and California Highway Patrol statistics, the wheel's three concentric circles can be spun to variables on the chart that display a corresponding percentage of likelihood for accidents due to distraction. For instance, lining up "text messaging" with "adjusting hair and make-up" with "three passengers in your car" will produce a certain percentage of risk toward an accident.

A Real Impact DVD will be enclosed in packets that detail the stories of four California teens involved in fatal car accidents. Impact Teen Drivers also will launch new web resources for teachers to tie the materials into their lessons, with interactive elements and videos, tips for parents and an interactive wall for people to create their own memorials to remember friends lost in accidents.

"It's important that we reach new drivers with the tools they need to be safe so they can enjoy the freedom a driver's license gives them," says Rick Mattos, president of the California Association of Highway Patrolmen. "When we roll up on an accident scene involving a teenager, it's too late for prevention. We have to get to them earlier."

For more information about Impact, visit Impactteendrivers.org, or call (916) 733-7432.

Also on MySpace and Facebook.

Teen Driving Facts

The driver fatality rate for 16-year-old drivers is nine times the rate for drivers 30 to 60 years old.

One in three teen drivers has an accident in their first year of driving.

Teenagers make up 7 percent of licensed drivers but suffer 14 percent of fatalities

.A 16-year-old soccer player has had about 1,500 hours of coached soccer practice, but only 50 hours of driving practice before getting their license.

There is no in-car driver training in the high school systems of 25 states, including California.