



Police watching roads during holiday weekend

By [JEFF BRANDT](#)

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Local, county and state police departments are teaming up with IDOT to crack down on drunken driving during the upcoming Fourth of July holiday weekend.

The Illinois Department of Transportation will run a \$1.4 million enforcement campaign from Friday through Sunday, putting in place more than 100 roadside safety checks across the state. The funds will compensate state troopers working overtime.

"During this year's Independence Day weekend, troopers around the state will be assigned to special emphasis patrols in an effort to keep Illinois roads safe," Illinois State Police Director Larry G. Trent said in a statement. State Police will "(place) an emphasis on drivers who are speeding, driving while impaired and not wearing seat belts."

IDOT reported four motor vehicle deaths during last year's Fourth of July holiday weekend, two of which involved drinking drivers.

"Of the 539 people (nationwide) who were killed in traffic crashes on Independence Day 2006, 37 percent involved a motorist with a blood-alcohol content of 0.08 percent (the level that constitutes a legal presumption of intoxication in Illinois) or higher," John J. Pastuovic, a spokesman for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, wrote in an e-mail. "Because of these sobering facts, July Fourth is the second-deadliest day of the year for alcohol-related fatalities."

Authorities agree driving "buzzed" is not a safe alternative to driving drunk.

"Research has found that even one drink alone can slow down people's response times," said Master Sgt. Brian Ley from the Illinois State Police.

Alcohol consumption also increases risky behavior.

"People think nothing's going to happen to them. They take more chances," Ley said.

Recent history suggests area crackdowns may have been successful.

"(ISP) District 11, which includes Madison County, did not have a fatality in the long weekend (from July 4 to 8) last year," Ley said. "We're hoping to match that statewide this year."

Drunkenness on the Fourth is not the only hazard for holiday weekend travelers. Seven fatalities due to traffic crashes occurred around Illinois other than in District 11 on Sunday, July 8, 2007.

"There's an increase of travel that day, and people are fatigued from the weekend," Ley said about the last day of the holiday weekend. "Oftentimes, people speed home to their destination for the week ahead. We're asking for people to slow down and be considerate of others."

The Madison County Sheriff's Department will be on the lookout for drunken drivers and other lawbreakers.

"The Fourth of July is a busy time for us. We certainly want to make sure it's a safe holiday for everyone," Sheriff Robert J. Hertz said.

County deputies will enforce the state ban on fireworks.

"Fireworks are against the law in the state of Illinois, and we'll take action on that," Hertz said.

Possession or discharge of fireworks is a misdemeanor.

Hertz encouraged fireworks enthusiasts to attend sponsored shows instead.

"Go to those and enjoy yourself, but be safe and not sorry," he said.

Problems with noise complaints and underage drinking often crop up on Independence Day weekend, as well.

"We discourage irresponsible partying and drinking," Hertz said. "If we're able to show or document that people under the age of 21 are drinking, they'll be arrested," along with adults 21 and older who provide alcohol.

Ley said motorists should report incidents of potential drunken driving to their local police departments or call 911.

For more information about impaired driving and safety campaigns, visit www.drivesoberillinois.org.

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