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NEWS RELEASE

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FASTEN YOUR SEAT BELTS — PRIMARY LAW NOW IN EFFECT

ST. PAUL — Minnesota's primary seat belt law goes into effect today, June 9, meaning drivers and passengers in all seating positions — including the back seat — must be buckled up or in the correct child restraint. Law enforcement can now stop motorists solely for seat belt violations, including unbelted passengers. Minnesota is the 29th state to pass a primary seat belt law following the recent passage by Arkansas and Florida legislatures.

Each year in Minnesota, around 200 unbelted motorists are killed and another 400 unbelted motorists suffer life-altering injuries, according to the Minnesota Department of Public Safety (DPS). Officials say a primary law will increase the state's belt use compliance and as a result prevent traffic deaths and injuries.

The June 9th enactment date of the primary seat belt law is in memory of Meghan Cooper, a 15-year-old girl from Southeastern Minnesota who died in a traffic accident on June 9, 1999. Meghan was unbuckled and ejected from the rear seat of the car she was riding in as it flipped. Meghan's mother, Kathy, has been urging legislators to strengthen Minnesota's seat belt law for 10 years.

Michael Champion, DPS commissioner, says that while a majority of Minnesotans use their seat belts (87 percent), those that don't — approximately 700,000 motorists — account for half of all motorist traffic deaths annually.

"Minnesota's new primary seat belt law will provide significant results in reducing traffic tragedies," says Champion. "The focus of this law is not on issuing citations, but rather on increasing seat belt compliance and ensuring Minnesotans are traveling as safely as possible to limit preventable deaths and injuries."

DPS says the lives saved and injuries prevented will also reduce state health care costs. Unbelted motorists injured in crashes have hospital charges 60 percent greater than those who are belted. During 2004–2005, all government payer sources, including Medicaid, were charged \$83 million for unbelted motorists' hospital charges. Unbelted motorist injury charges were 78 percent greater for Medicaid than belted motorists.

These costs do not include the far-greater, long-term medical charges commonly associated with unbelted motorist injuries. These include follow-up doctor and specialist care, injury rehabilitation and extended nursing or assisted-living care.

Officials say the primary law is especially relevant in Greater Minnesota. Each year, nearly 80 percent of unbelted traffic deaths occur outside the seven-county metro area. The law will also impact young motorists ages 15–29 who account for nearly half of all unbelted deaths, and more than half of all unbelted serious injuries annually.

While the law is principally a life-saving measure, Col. Mark Dunaski, chief of the State Patrol says the primary belt law will also serve as another tool to help in the fight against impaired driving. Each year 80 percent of drinking drivers killed in crashes are also not buckled up. Dunaski says the primary law could factor in law enforcement stopping suspected impaired drivers before they harm themselves or innocent motorists.

“The real enforcement of this law begins with motorists insisting their passengers buckle up,” Dunaski says. “This law demonstrates that the state takes seat belt use seriously and that buckling your seat belt is a serious matter.” Dunaski adds that troopers will enforce the law as they do any other traffic violation to ensure a safe driving environment on Minnesota roads.

Cheri Marti, DPS director of the Office of Traffic Safety, says the primary law’s June 9 effective date is important as the state enters the heart of the summer driving months, the deadliest time on the roads. In last three years, there were 476 traffic deaths June–August and 1,798 serious injuries.

“There is no better defense than a seat belt against impaired, aggressive and distracted drivers, which become serious threats during the high-traffic summer driving season,” says Marti. She says motorists also need to wear their belt properly. Lap belts should be low and snug across the hips; shoulder straps should never be tucked under an arm or behind the back. Not only is this unsafe, it is illegal.

“Seat belts restrain motorists in the vehicle’s designed protective space, giving them room to live in the event of a crash,” says Marti, noting belts also keep motorists positioned properly behind the wheel to help a driver better control a vehicle. “Without a belt, a motorist is almost guaranteed injury in the event of a crash, ranging from a head hitting the windshield to being ejected.”

The launch of the primary law follows a May two-week statewide Click It or Ticket seat belt enforcement sweep that resulted in 7,189 seat belt citations. Of those cited, 1,501 were ticketed at night — special patrols were executed to combat a trend of unbelted deaths during the hours of 9 p.m. – 3 a.m. Around 400 law enforcement agencies participated in the campaign.

The total cost for a seat belt citation is about \$110. All unbelted motorists 15 years of age or older will receive a citation. The driver will be charged an additional \$25 citation fee for each unbelted occupant under the age of 15.

The new seat belt law is called the Kathryn Swanson Seat Belt Safety Act — named in honor of the former director of the DPS Office of Traffic Safety and long-time seat belt advocate who died in 2008 after a battle with ALS.

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