

# Rochester and Lee police put out the word for people in trucks to buckle up

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ROCHESTER — "Buckle up in your truck" is a message police in Rochester and Lee hope to ingrain in the minds of pickup truck drivers and passengers through a campaign to raise awareness of the risk people take when they choose not to wear seat belts.

Rochester and Lee police have received highway safety grants from the Department of Safety to implement the "Buckle up in your truck" initiative. They are two of four communities in the state, along with Littleton and Lisbon, involved in the effort, according to Howard Hedegard, the highway safety specialist at the injury prevention center of the Children's Hospital at Dartmouth-Hitchcock.

The NH Highway Safety Agency says the state's overall seat belt usage in 2007 was 63.8 percent. The seat belt usage for pickup truck drivers was 42.6 percent and for passengers 45.7 percent.

The campaign involves posting signs along roadways, handing out bracelets and other goods emblazoned with the slogan and surveying truck drivers and passengers to see if it makes an impact, Hedegard said. He said the idea is to make people see the message multiple times, allowing it to sink in.

"It's just trying to get the word out in as diverse ways as possible," he said.

Hedegard said a visual survey conducted at intersections in Rochester revealed a 33 percent seat belt usage rate among people in pickup trucks. He called the results "terrible."

There is no law in New Hampshire requiring people ages 18 and up to use seat belts, but Hedegard said it is still important to urge people to buckle up. He said people in pickup trucks have the lowest overall seat belt usage.

Authorities believe there are several reasons for that statistic. Hedegard said most drivers believe they will never be involved in accidents; the majority of pickup truck drivers are men; and people sometimes do not wear seat belts because they say they are uncomfortable or will wrinkle their clothes.

Rochester Police Capt. Paul Callaghan added that people driving the larger vehicles, such as pickups or SUVs, may feel safer, but said statistics show a higher incidence of ejections in accidents involving pickups. He said trucks have larger windows than other vehicles, while Hedegard noted that they have higher rollover rates than other types of cars.

According to the Brain Injury Association of America, 1.4 million people suffer a traumatic brain



Courtesy graphic Rochester and Lee Police are currently involved in an initiative to get pickup truck drivers and passengers to buckle their seat belts.

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injury each year in the United States. Twenty percent of those are due to motor vehicle accidents.

Hedegard said there were more than 600 admissions into brain injury rehabilitation in New Hampshire in 2009. More than half of those were related to motor vehicle accidents, he said. For people under 34 years of age, motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death, he said.

Studies by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in 2008 revealed that 67 percent of pickup truck drivers killed in accidents were unrestrained, compared to 61 percent for SUVs and 48 percent for vans and passenger cars. Similarly, 65 percent of passenger fatalities in pickups involved failure to use a seat belt, compared to 59 percent for SUVs, 53 percent for vans and 46 percent for passenger cars, according to the NHTSA.

Callaghan said police in Rochester have broken up the initiative in multiple phases and are involving the youth in the police Explorer's program. He said they conducted two surveys in downtown and on Route 125 to observe whether people in trucks were wearing seat belts. They have posted signs and will conduct focus groups to spread the word. Another survey in six weeks will reveal whether they made an impact, he said.

It is not an issue of enforcement, but Callaghan said the primary duty of police is to protect lives and property.

"The primary focus is protection," he said.

Lee Police Chief Chet Murch said officers have placed a wrecked truck at the Lee Speedway. He said many who attend the races drive pickups, so they believe the campaign can have a big impact there.

Murch said it is unfortunate that there is no law mandating seat belt use. He supports such a law, saying seat belts are proven to save lives.

He said that if the campaign changes even a few minds, it could potentially save someone's life.

"I thought it was an important campaign when they came to us," he said.