

## **New Safety Focus Takes Aim at Traffic Deaths, Injuries**

Every year more than 50 people are killed in traffic accidents in the Lehigh Valley and another 150 are seriously injured, but regional leaders are now increasing efforts to bring both of those numbers down.

Some of that new safety push will involve state-of-the-art designs to make the road, trail and transit infrastructure safer, but the biggest impact can be made by changing dangerous behaviors that leave drivers, pedestrians, cyclists and children at risk.

That was the message from traffic safety experts in Lehigh and Northampton counties last week during the LVPC's Multimodal Working Group meeting.

"Transportation safety is an enormous issue in the Lehigh Valley," said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. "When people think about traffic, they think of only cars, but pedestrians and cyclists are part of traffic, so if we're going to tackle this issue, we need to consider safety globally."

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation statistics over the past decade show that an average of 58 people are killed in Lehigh Valley crashes each year, and another 150 are seriously injured.

Reducing those numbers in the longer term can be done with universal design that reimagines the transportation infrastructure with vehicles, bikers and all types of pedestrians in mind, but in the shorter term both counties are already increasing their efforts at enforcement and education.

The LVPC and the Multimodal Working Group have launched a yearlong effort to draft a walking and biking masterplan designed to develop a safer, more connected and more accessible road, trail, sidewalk and transit network. It could lead to closing trail gaps, getting people safer access to transit stops and improving pedestrian and bicycle safety across the region. It'll take years, but the goal is to address some of those infrastructure issues. For example, closing the right trail gap might open a commuting corridor that reduces road traffic, bike lanes could improve safety on some roads and intersection "bumpout" could make pedestrians more visible on busy urban streets.

Changing behavior is another issue entirely.

“How do we get people and drivers to follow the laws that are already in place,” said Scott Slingerland, Executive Director of the Coalition for Appropriate Transportation. “We need some creative ways to engage the public.”

Some of that’s already happening – whether people like it or not – and it’s going to happen a lot more in the future.

The Bethlehem Health Bureau has been conducting education programs and traffic safety stings at problem intersections for years, but that program is being expanded to go countywide. In addition to mature driver and bicycle safety education, and car seat and seatbelt safety programs, the bureau conducts enforcement projects at busy crosswalks to determine whether motorists follow state laws that require drivers to stop for any pedestrian that shows an “intent” to move through a crosswalk.

It found that, during its enforcement stings, 53% of all drivers did not stop for pedestrians in the crosswalk. Some simply didn’t know the law, while others were too distracted to notice.

“We’re seeing a lot of people on their phones,” said Sherri Penchishen, Bureau Director of Injury and Disease Prevention, Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Health Education programs. “They just don’t have their heads up.”

Highway Safety Network, a New Tripoli non-profit, is conducting a similar “Community Traffic Safety Project” in Lehigh County.

“The program is designed to reduce crashes, injuries and deaths – at a local level,” said Chris Lenge, Traffic Safety Coordinator for Highway Safety Network. The program focuses on aggressive driving, distracted driving, impaired drivers, drivers older than 65 and younger than 18, commercial vehicles, pedestrians and bicycles, Lenge said.

But Lenge and Penchishen agreed that, much like improving infrastructure, improving behavior won’t happen overnight.

After Bethlehem conducted its intersection enforcements, officers returned a month later to find that the number of drivers who didn’t stop for pedestrians at crosswalks had dropped to 47%.

“We’re slowly making a difference,” Penchishen said. “But it takes a really long time to change people’s habits.”

Anyone interested in getting involved or knowing more can visit <http://www.lvpc.org/walkbikelv.html>. The webpage includes an interactive map that enables users to log their suggestions and experiences – good and bad – on the region’s road, sidewalk and trail network. They can also attend the next Multimodal Working Group meeting at 3 p.m. November 28 at Northampton Community College’s Fowler Family Southside Center, or attend the WalkBikeLV open house in the same room at 6 p.m. that day.

