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NEWS RELEASE

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Delaware Seat Belt Use Declines – Mobilization to Increase Seat Belt Law Compliance Starts Saturday

Dover – Delaware Office of Highway Safety officials usually enjoy announcing a decrease in traffic related statistics...but not this time. For the first time in more than a decade, Delaware's statewide seat belt use rate has declined. Results from observational seat belt surveys conducted in June have revealed that the state's 2009 statewide usage rate is 88%. This is a decrease from the 2008 statewide seat belt use rate of 91%.

“We are extremely disappointed in this decrease in the state's seat belt use rate particularly since we, in partnership with law enforcement statewide, and our partners in the healthcare, public safety and corporate communities, have worked so hard each year to keep increasing our usage rate,” said Jana Simpler, Occupant Protection Coordinator for the Delaware Office of Highway Safety. “Higher seat belt use rates generally translate into more lives saved and that is always our ultimate goal.”

Sadly, the overall decrease in seat belt use is also being reflected in this year's fatal crash statistics. Since January 1st of this year, of the 49 drivers and passengers killed in Delaware motor vehicle crashes 32 (or 65%) of them were not wearing seat belts. Comparatively, at this time in 2008, 22 (or 48%) of the then 46 drivers and passengers killed were not wearing seat belts.

To address the decline in seat belt use, the Office of Highway Safety is coordinating a statewide enforcement and awareness mobilization which begins Saturday August 1st. From August through November, Bridgeville Police, Harrington Police, Laurel Police, Milford Police, Millsboro Police, Ocean View Police, and Seaford Police will conduct traffic safety patrols looking for unbuckled drivers and passengers.

New Castle County Police will conduct both checkpoints and patrols in an effort to increase compliance with Delaware's seat belt laws. Seat belt usage declined by 4% each in New Castle and Sussex Counties, while the usage rate actually increased by 1% in Kent County. Agencies including the Delaware State Police as well as some municipal agencies in each county will continue conducting enforcement of occupant protection laws as part of an existing year long grant they have with the Office of Highway Safety, but are not being counted as participants in the stepped up mobilization.

"This is not another Click It or Ticket campaign," said Andrea Summers, Community Relations Officer for OHS. "Click It or Ticket is a specific month-long initiative that is conducted nationwide in May. It's designed to be a short term effort. This special mobilization involves sustained seat belt enforcement over a longer period of time and will take us into the holiday season."

Enforcement activities will take place during all days of the week and at least half of each agency's efforts will occur at night. Seat belt use is often 10% lower at night than in the day even though a person's chances of being killed in a crash at night triples. In fact, more than half of the people killed in night time crashes from 2003 – 2007 in the First State were not wearing seat belts.

The enforcement plan is being supported by a public awareness component beginning in mid – August to include radio advertising, billboards, print ads in community newspapers and messages on gas pump toppers.

Delaware law requires drivers and *all* passengers, including those in the back seat, to wear a seat belt. An officer can pull over a driver if he sees any person not wearing one.

Officers will be issuing citations for seat belt violations as part of a zero tolerance policy. The ticket, which goes to the driver no matter who is unbuckled in the vehicle, is a \$25.00 fine plus court administrative fees, which can eventually total more than \$70.00.

Lack of seat belt use is a serious public safety and public health concern. Wearing a seat belt can improve your chance of surviving a crash, or escaping serious injury by up to 50%. In 2008, as many as 20 lives could have been saved had the victims in Delaware crashes worn a seat belt.

For weekly updates on OHS's seat belt mobilization results please visit the Newsroom on the OHS website at www.ohs.delaware.gov . While there, bookmark the site in your RSS Reader. You can also follow OHS updates on our activities on Twitter at www.twitter.com/DEHighwaySafe .