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FOCUS ON DRIVER DEATHS IN WORK ZONE AWARENESS WEEK

by Tom Kuennen

July 2002 -- This spring the third annual National Work Zone Awareness Week brought focus to the dangers of highway work zones, and that the zones represent a greater danger to drivers than to workers.

National Work Zone Awareness Week (April 8-12) was initiated by the U.S. Department of Transportation and state, local and private sector partners at a Washington Beltway work zone in Maryland April 9.

There, a National Work Zone Memorial was unveiled which contains the names of persons killed in work zones, and will be displayed at future highway safety events throughout the country.

The number of people killed in motor vehicle crashes in work zones increased from 789 in 1995 to an all-time high of 1,093 in 2000, the latest year for which firm figures are available.

Ironically, while surveys show motorists feel that workers, not

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motorists, are most at risk in work zones, in actuality each year more than 80 percent of all fatalities in work zone crashes are motor vehicle occupants. One of the goals of the awareness week is to publicize the fact that motorists bear the brunt of work zone fatalities and injuries. Work zone injuries alone total than 40,000 each year.

Underscoring the seriousness with which our roadbuilding institutions hold this issue was the fact that some of the industry's biggest heavy-hitters -- and national associations -- were represented. U.S. DOT partners included the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), and the American Traffic Safety Services Association (ATSSA).

Other steering institutions included Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration, Virginia Department of Transportation, D.C. Department of Transportation, the American Road and Transportation Builders Association and the Associated General Contractors of America.

"Motorists should exercise the utmost caution when they drive through highway construction zones, both for their own safety and for the safety of construction workers," urged U.S. Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta. "The National Work Zone Memorial is a poignant reminder of the tragedy that results when we are not careful in work zones."

Go beyond traditional approaches

"We must go beyond our traditional approaches to improve both safety and mobility in work zones," said Federal Highway Administrator Mary Peters. "We are examining all the processes that lead up to a project so we can make a substantial change in the impact of a work zone on travelers and workers and improve safety."

To enhance project safety, more thought has to go into projects at the planning stage, Peters said. "It is no longer enough to think only about the orange barrels and barricades," she said. "Mobility and safety go hand in hand."

This summer motorists will see more work zones than ever, Peters said. "Large parts of our interstate system are almost 50 years old. Many other roads and bridges are wearing out ... Traffic is growing and congestion is growing. We are traveling more miles without significantly increasing highway capacity. Congestion leads to frustration for someone who's late arriving at some place important."

Peters said industry should:

- o Commit itself to life-cycle cost analyses to evaluate project options and the use of long-life pavement to reduce frequency of repairs
- o Plan and design projects to get in, get out, and stay out
- o Develop analytic tools to estimate work zone delays and user costs
- o Identify and promote the use of work zone best practices
- o Tell travelers what to expect far enough in advance so they can plan an alternative route
- o Design defensive work zones to protect workers from motorists, and
- o Consider total road closures where appropriate.

"Work zones are proof that America takes care of its infrastructure," said James C. Codell III, vice president of AASHTO. "But our motorists must remember to take care of themselves, their passengers, and construction and maintenance people."

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Lives would be saved just by motorists' slowing down in work zones, said ATSSA president Kathi Holst. "What most motorists do not realize is the majority of those killed in work zones are motorists, not the workers themselves," she said.

Trucks more deadly during day

The FHWA analyzed the latest work zone stats and determined the number of persons killed in motor vehicle crashes in work zones rose from 717 in 1996 to a high of 1,093 in 2000, an average of 829 fatalities per year. Of those, 264 deaths resulted from large truck crashes, and 5,000 were injured.

The most common crash in a highway work zone is a rear end collision.

On average from 1996 to 2000, 16 percent of the fatalities resulting from crashes in work zones were non-motorists (pedestrians and bicyclists).

In 2000, over half of overall fatal work zone crashes occurred during the day, while about two-thirds of fatal large truck work zone crashes occurred during the day. That year almost two times as many fatal work zone crashes occurred on weekdays compared to weekends, FHWA said.

In 2000, fatal work zone crashes, regardless of whether a large truck was involved or not, occurred most often in the summer and the fall months. Also, that year the majority of fatal work zone crashes for all vehicles and large trucks occurred on roads with speed limits of 55 miles per hour or greater (60 and 70 percent, respectively).

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