

Get All Defensive: A Crash Course To Reduce Distracted Driving

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Assuming you commute by car, how much behind the wheel bad behavior do you see in the course of a week? The low hanging *rotten* fruit is distracted driving from use of personal electronic devices (PEDs) for navigation, tunes, talk, or texting. How many incidents do you see involving corporate vehicles with identifying brands proudly displayed: a local business, a delivery vehicle, municipal or utility truck? Narrow that down to just vehicles with a “How’s My Driving?” sticker on them. We’re guessing you’ve been tempted to call more than a few managers. We’re hoping these calls were not made while driving.

Distracted driving incidents have necessitated a change in nomenclature. The term “crash” has replaced motor vehicle “accident” in the clinical, research, and policy lexicon, going back at least to a 1997 National Traffic Safety Administration campaign called “Crashes Aren’t Accidents.” And it’s only become worse with the ubiquity of PEDs. *The New York Times* recently reported “roadway fatalities are soaring at a rate not seen in 50 years, resulting from crashes, collisions and other incidents caused by drivers.” All but about 6 percent of crashes are caused by behavior like drinking, distracted driving and other risky activity, leaving a fraction caused by vehicle malfunctions, weather and other factors. Changing the semantics to describe traffic events that are avoidable is meant to redress the “nobody’s fault” attitude implicit in the word “accident.”

Nonprofits that rely on the use of automobiles and passenger vans have legal obligations arising from their use. This is true even if the nonprofit has no owned automobiles or paid fleet operators. Accidents typically involve an employee or a volunteer driving an organization-owned vehicle. However, employees or volunteers using their own vehicles for a nonprofit’s activities will also expose the organization to risk.

Establishing A Defensive Driving Program

Many of the factors that contribute to death and injury due to motor vehicle crashes can be eliminated or reduced through education and training.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describes three primary varieties of distraction:

- Visual: taking your eyes off the road;
- Manual: taking your hands off the wheel; and
- Cognitive: taking your mind off of driving.

All three of these are addressed in a basic defensive driving course. Some may view these courses as somehow punitive. They are most emphatically not, and more awareness of their value for all drivers can change that perception. While it’s true that courts may require someone to take a defensive driving course, or an insurance company may suggest the course to reduce points on an individual’s driver’s license. A defensive driving course works best when administered proactively—hence, defensively.

A defensive driving course may be the most effective means at your disposal to reduce insurance costs, protect facilities and assets, and above all, assure employee and public safety. It will pay bottom line dividends to your

organization in the long run, and to the individuals who take the course. Upon completion, students receive a certificate that, in many states, can be used to lower personal automobile insurance rates. The caveat? You'll need buy-in from everyone in your organization.

Obtaining Buy-In

Creating appropriate buy-in prior to unleashing the new course will make everyone more comfortable with the initiative, dispel any notion that only bad drivers take a defensive driving course, and serve to make the adoption of the program into policy. Actively engage your employees, volunteers and leadership teams by encouraging them to participate in training, and by providing materials and resources to promote awareness about the importance of safe driving and your new program.

As an added incentive, many insurers offer a discount (of up to 10%) for those individuals who take a defensive driving course. The course can also reduce up to 4 points on an individual's license. Depending on the course, it takes between 4-6 hours to complete, and costs around twenty-five dollars. Many available courses are described as interactive and engaging.

For larger organizations the nonprofit National Safety Council can custom design a defensive driving course training website with co-branded pages for your nonprofit. The site will contain your organization's logo, a personalized employee login, and enhanced reporting capabilities. Web hosting and customer technical support are included.

Did You Know?

- According to the CDC, the average time people take their eyes off of the road when texting and driving is five seconds. This number may seem small, but when traveling at a speed of 55 mph, this is enough time to drive the length of a football field, essentially blindfolded.
- Add to this the time it takes to brake. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a typical reaction time to perceive a threat is 1.5 seconds. At 55 mph, the distance traveled is 121 feet. Only then does the car begin to slow. On dry pavement it takes 4 1/2 seconds, traveling 144 feet before coming to a stop, but if the pavement is wet, you'll be traveling 183 feet. Which means, it takes about the distance of a football field to stop the car at 55 mph, assuming the driver was alert, and had not already traveled that distance while texting.
- Tragically, each day in the United States, approximately 9 people are killed and more than 1,000 injured in crashes that are reported to involve a distracted driver.

Organizations large and small should address distracted driving and fleet safety policies, limiting or prohibiting the use of PEDs while driving. Caring about the people who serve and are served by your mission plus the possibility that your nonprofit may be liable for motor vehicle crashes involving staff while driving are powerful incentive for establishing such a policy.

A couple of years ago, after doing some research for an [Affiliate Member](#), we concluded that a total ban on PEDs while driving was the only sensible course of action for organizations that care about their staff members. At NRMCC, we decided to adopt a total ban on PED use ourselves.

Everyone in your organization should be encouraged, if not required, to participate in your driver safety course, including top-level management. Since leaders have the authority to set policies, allocate resources, encourage employee participation, and influence the workplace culture into one that views safety as a top priority, their support of the program is vital in order to get it off the ground and to keep employees involved.

Resources

- [Safety is Not a Luxury: Understanding the Risks of Passenger Vans](#)
- [Adopt a Total Ban on PED Use While Driving](#)
- [Avoid Distracted Driving: Don't Get Teary & Put Down Siri](#)
- Blueprint for Ending Distracted Driving, www.distracted.gov
- Injury Prevention & Control: Motor Vehicle Safety, www.cdc.gov/Motorvehiclesafety/index.html
- This National Safety Council infographic explains the danger of PED use while driving: [Hands-Free is Not Risk-Free](#)