

Our Transportation System is in Crisis – 366

I recently participated in a seminar on “Toward Zero Deaths: A National Strategy on Highway Safety.” Toward Zero Deaths (TZD) is a US national strategy on road safety, and is a tool for helping to organise and mobilize efforts to reduce fatalities and serious injuries relating to traffic crashes. TZD was developed through collaboration by many stakeholders, including several public and private agencies within the United States, and is intended to represent a consensus-based document. It defines a common vision that will drive their individual and collaborative efforts.

TZD strategy involves exploring what influences road users decision-making, and why and how these influences have such an impact. These influences include: (a) Road users who lack concern for how their actions affect other road users, (b) who travel unsafely in order to save time, or (c) who have the tendency to overestimate their abilities. The philosophy is that positively changing the safety culture among road users would lead them to understand the potential results of their actions or inactions and recognise that they must base their decisions primarily on safety.

The element of the transportation system that contributes most frequently to the occurrence of traffic crashes is the driver. The primary approaches are as follows:

1. Increase Seat Belt Use by Drivers and Passengers. The TZD Strategy found that 52 percent of the fatalities were unrestrained, and that increasing restraint use has needed and will continue to need legislative, enforcement, education, and technological solutions.

2. Reduce Speeding-Related Fatalities. The TZD strategy has suggested that speeding contributes to both the occurrence of crashes and to their severity; approaches

must involve roadway design and treatments, vehicle design, and efforts to change driver attitudes and behaviour. In Trinidad and Tobago (TnT), we have a unique problem: we still do not have an appropriate method to enforce traffic speeding. The current law and enforcement mechanism are archaic, and execution is unsafe for the enforcer. There is no apparent priority for traffic speed enforcement.

3. Reduce Impaired Driving. About one-third of all crash fatalities involve a driver with a BAC [Blood Alcohol Content] over the legal limit; less is known about the extent of drugged driving, but there is an increasing focus on understanding and combatting this form of impaired driving. TZD Strategy has described ignition interlock devices being used in some States which prevent vehicles from starting if alcohol over a specified concentration is detected on the drivers’ breath. Also, Passive alcohol detection systems are being developed to detect alcohol use without a person having to be actively tested (specifically by blowing into a breath alcohol testing device). These devices would test the air, the driver’s skin, or other means, and then prevent the vehicle from starting if the alcohol concentration is over a specified level.

Drug-impaired driving should be a major concern in TnT, since most of the bars are located near highways and main roads.

4. Reduce Driver Distraction TZD Strategy recognised that it can be difficult to determine whether distraction is a factor in a crash, but noted that using a cell phone while driving is a common distraction, and other distractions include talking with other passengers, eating, programming a navigation device.

Road user distractions can include person both inside and outside a vehicle – it is not uncommon to see a pedestrian with headphone use and obviously of the goings-on around him or her.

5. Increase Safety of Younger Drivers. TZD Strategy stated that motor vehicle crashes remain the leading cause of death for American teenagers; and that these novice drivers merit special attention because they have less experience on the roadway and may often overrate their driving abilities.

6. Increase Safety of Older Drivers. TZD Strategy stated that road users older than 65 years account for 16 percent of all licensed drivers—a number that will increase dramatically as the nation’s population ages; and that efforts to ensure older drivers are able to continue driving safely should focus on functional capabilities related to motor skill coordination and response time, rather than chronological age.

TZD Strategy is suggesting that *“improving driver behaviour is accomplished through education, enforcement, and technology strategies that encourage proper driving behaviour or prevent risky behaviours. In addition to coordinated programs that prevent specific behaviours, there is a need to change the reasons why people make unsafe decisions regarding the way they drive, as well as the legislation, enforcement activities, and other countermeasures they will support.”* Please visit (www.TowardZeroDeaths.org).

To be continued.

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