

COMMENTARY: Don't let traffic tragedy mar the holidays

By **Sheila Burgess And Emily S. Ring**

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QUINCY — Thanksgiving is a time for traditions: Expressing gratitude for what we have; taking in a football game; and, of course, partaking that slice of pie.

It's also North America's busiest travel holiday. A recent Mapquest poll indicated most people who travel by car for Thanksgiving have more than an hour's drive ahead of them, and a quarter of holiday drivers have road trips that exceed 200 miles.

With all those additional cars on the road, Massachusetts residents need to take extra care when heading out.

In 2008 there were five fatalities in Massachusetts from motor vehicle crashes over the four-day Thanksgiving weekend. All were unbuckled. Despite the evidence that seat belts can prevent serious injury or death in an automobile crash, more than 25 percent of Massachusetts motorists still do not heed that warning.

Seat belt use is important for motorists of any age, but one of the most disturbing trends is that compliance among teens – who are at higher risk for distracted driving – is the lowest rate of any population group, at 59 percent. It is troubling that so many of our state's young people fail to grasp that a seat belt can make the difference between life and death.

You can be sure no parent would let a child who plays football line up to block an opposing player this Thanksgiving without wearing a helmet or padding. So why let them drive or ride without wearing their seat belt? As parents, we need to be vigilant about reminding our teens to buckle up.

During this fall's "Click It or Ticket" mobilization, which runs through Nov. 29, Massachusetts State Police and local police departments will be out in force promoting and enforcing seat belt use. As part of the campaign, funded by the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, the State Police will roll out extra four-hour patrols across the state and local police departments will do even more. If you or any of your passengers are caught without a seat belt, you will be fined for every person that is unbuckled.

Every traffic death is a tragedy. What makes these events even more tragic is that in many instances, seat belts could have saved those lives.

This message is never "out of season," but is especially important at this time of year when holiday travel increases congestion on roadways, which in turn, increases the chances of a driver being in a crash.

Take the time to put on your seat belt every trip, every time, and you will have made a decision for which we all can be thankful.

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