Spike in Fatal DUIs Draws Concern, Drunk Driving Reminder from Law Enforcement

11 People Killed in DUI Crashes This Summer, Six in August Alone

San Diego County District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis joined law enforcement leaders today to express serious concerns over the troubling number of fatal accidents that have occurred over the summer which are a direct result of drinking and driving. Eleven people have been killed in a series of crashes around San Diego County since May and 23 serious or fatal DUI cases issued since January 1. Five crashes have occurred in August alone, killing six people.

“This has been a summer of shame when it comes to fatal DUIs,” said DA Dumanis. “The conduct of the individuals who caused these crashes is horrific. We’ve had drunks driving the wrong way on the highway, individuals consuming alcohol for hours before getting behind the wheel and a young mother driving with her children in the car while using drugs. Tragically, lives have been lost because of these preventable crimes, which should serve as a wakeup call to anyone even thinking about driving under the influence.”

One year ago, the DA’s Office launched a DUI Homicide Unit to prosecute fatalities and serious injuries. The unit, made up of two prosecutors and two investigators, has been so busy they have had to rely on additional prosecutors in the office. Funding for this unit comes in part from the California Office of Traffic Safety. Watch more about the DUI Homicide Unit here.

Last year more than 12,330 DUI-related cases were prosecuted in San Diego County. Of that number, the District Attorney’s Office prosecuted 363 DUI with injury cases and 17 involving fatalities. During the same time period, 46 percent of DUI drivers in the county had a blood alcohol content higher than .15 percent – nearly twice the legal limit.

As we go into the Labor Day weekend, law enforcement will be cracking down on suspected DUI drivers through added sobriety check points and a ‘no tolerance approach’ to impaired driving.
“This is one crime that is entirely preventable,” Sheriff Bill Gore said. “The San Diego Sheriff’s Department has a zero-tolerance policy. You will go to jail if our deputies stop you for driving under the influence.”

While there has been a spate of fatal DUI crashes, this summer, there is some good news in the area of misdemeanor DUI prosecutions. Since 2010, misdemeanor DUI prosecutions across San Diego County are down 29 percent. What’s causing the decline is unclear, but one reason could be the increased use of ride services like Uber and Lyft.

“DUI is a 100 percent preventable crime,” said San Diego Police Chief Shelley Zimmerman. “People make decisions everyday regarding right and wrong. If you drink and make the terrible decision to drive, that decision may cost you more than a DUI. It might cost you your life or the life of another.”

“On behalf of all of the county police chiefs and the sheriff, we are united in eliminating all DUI-related accidents so that no more families need to experience this tragic loss,” said Craig Carter, President of the San Diego County Sheriffs and Police Chiefs Association.

“These preventable tragedies are caused by deliberate and thoughtless decisions to drive impaired. The resulting pain and suffering to survivors, victim family and friends is unimaginable. The loss they feel is immeasurable and permanent,” said Steve Lykins, Executive Director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

California Highway Patrol officers are often on the frontlines of encountering and citing intoxicated drivers. “Without exception, every traffic collision fatality caused by an intoxicated driver is preventable,” said CHP Border Division Chief Jim Abele. “Each of us must drive responsibly and that especially includes driving unimpaired. Our citizens, family members and visitor drivers are California's most valued commodity."

Pending fatal DUI criminal cases being prosecuted by the DA’s Office that have occurred since May include:

**The People v. Shane McDonald** – Defendant was traveling the wrong way in the HOV lane on Interstate 15 and crashed into a car carrying a family of five. Two were killed.

**The People v. Jason King** – Defendant was traveling the wrong way on California State Route 163 after a night of drinking and plowed into a car with five medical students inside, killing two of them.

**The People v. Manuel Vareja Jr.** – Defendant was traveling on Interstate 805 when he crashed into the back of a big rig truck leaving the his passenger a quadriplegic.

**The People v. Suzanne Elliott** – Defendant crashes into a motorcycle with two riders leaving both seriously injured.

**The People v. Heriberto Covarrubias** – Defendant collides with a tow truck, speeds away eventually t-boning another car with two occupants. Victims sustain shattered pelvis, brain injury and broken ribs.

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**The People v. Chase Beatty** – Defendant consumes alcohol for hours then barrels down a country road crashing into a tree, which killed his passenger.

**The People v. Anthony Rodriguez** – Defendant crashes head-on into an oncoming car after hours of drinking at a baseball game and multiple bars. The victim died at the scene.

**The People v. Brian Mitchell** – Defendant hits and seriously injures a 77-year-old woman crossing the street and speeds away.

**The People v. Kevin Laguit** – Defendant is speeding on a Chula Vista street before hitting a car with two occupants. One victim suffers a skull fracture and the second sustained minor injuries.

**The People v. Christopher Henry** – Defendant is driving twice the speed limit when he strikes a motorcyclist head-on. The victim died at the scene.

**The People v. James G. Gelrud** – Defendant was traveling on U.S. Highway 395 when he crossed the double yellow lines hitting the victim’s car head-on. A third car rear ends the victim, who died at the scene.

**The People v. Joshua Taylor** – Defendant drove through a red light killing the victim who was walking through a crosswalk.

**The People v. Antoni Schoenle** – Defendant is traveling on Friars Road after drinking and consuming drugs at an all-night rave when he lost control of his car and crashed. The car caught fire and the two female occupants burned to death.

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*Note: Misdemeanor DUI cases in the City of San Diego are prosecuted by the City Attorney’s Office. Misdemeanor DUI cases outside the City of San Diego are generally prosecuted by the District Attorney’s Office. The DA’s Office prosecutes all felony DUI cases in the County.*