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Texting and Driving Changes Lives

For Julie Breitenstein, distracted driving changed her life, and that of her entire family.

“When you are behind the wheel of a vehicle, no text message is so important that it cannot wait,” Breitenstein said Friday at the State Capitol in Topeka. “When you are driving, every text message can wait.”

Breitenstein spoke at a news conference announcing a statewide campaign to stop texting while driving. Also on the program was her son, Austin, who was incapacitated in a 2009 crash in which he was texting and driving.

Accompanying Austin was his companion dog, Macie. Before the crash, Austin was a popular student with a vibrant family and social life.

“Today, Macie is Austin’s best friend,” Breitenstein said.

Paul Atchley, a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, preceded Breitenstein on the program and spoke about the growing aspect of distracted driving as a cause of vehicle crashes.

“Distracted driving is underreported as a cause of crashes because, unlike impaired driving, it is difficult to legally establish and challenging to prove,” Atchley said.

Crash report investigations often require additional evidence and resources, Atchley said, so distraction often is not reported as a contributing circumstance when it may well have been a key factor.

Gary Warner, Public Resource Officer for the Kansas Highway Patrol, said troopers, police officers and sheriff's deputies across the state are more diligently enforcing the state law which prohibits texting while driving.

In cooperation with the Kansas Department of Transportation, law enforcement will be conducting overtime enforcement and supporting an advertising campaign running through April 27 urging Kansans to 'Ditch the distractions, not the car. JUST DRIVE.'

"When you text while driving, you take your eyes off the road, hands off the wheel and mind off the task of driving," Warner said. "That puts everybody's lives in danger, and no one has the right to do that."

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