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Sobering statistics a reminder of DUI dangers

By Kim Beltran

Tribune Editor

Americans who drink and drive after holiday parties and festivities make the period between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day one of the deadliest and most dangerous seasons due to alcohol-related crashes.

The good news in California is that deaths from alcohol-related crashes declined in both 2007 and 2008, thanks in large part to increases in DUI arrests, according to the state's Office of Traffic Safety. The bad news is that 1,029 people died in California in 2008 because of drunk drivers.

And, according to Shirin Vakharia, prevention coordinator for the county's Health and Human Services Agency's Alcohol and Drug Services Division, Napa County's DUI rate is more than twice the state average.

The message she's trying to get across this holiday season is simple.

"Anybody can get a DUI. It's not just something that happens to people who have a drinking problem," Vakharia said. "There is no safe amount of alcohol if you drink and drive. You can't *feel* .08 (the state's legal limit for intoxication)."

If you plan to be at any holiday gathering or party where alcohol is being served, make a plan for getting home ahead of time and stick to it, she said. Designate a sober driver or take a taxi. Don't, however, start out saying you'll only have one or two drinks and then sober up before driving home. The effects of alcohol could hinder any-

one's best laid plans.

As part of the Napa County DUI Task Force, Vakharia's office is charged with educating the public, including businesses that serve alcohol, about the dangers of drinking and driving.

On the other end of the task force are the various law enforcement agencies that plan to be out in force both this holiday weekend and next.

CAN YOU AFFORD A DUI?

Police are stepping up patrols and checkpoints during this period, and, at the least, a first-time DUI citation can cost thousands of dollars in fines, court costs and attorney's fees and untold embarrassment. At the worst, jail time, job loss and/or severe injury or death to yourself or someone else.

Vakharia said the task force, formed just a year ago, is working diligently to get winery, restaurant and bar owners to recognize the importance of training their staff to know when someone's had enough and to stop serving them.

As distasteful as that may sound, the alternatives could be much worse. If someone leaves a business where they bought or were served alcohol and then causes an accident that results in injury or death, the business could face a civil lawsuit, increased insurance premiums and bad publicity. If the drunk person who caused the accident was a minor, there could be criminal penalties as well, she said.

One Calistoga family that knows all too well the horror that drunk driving can cause is the Ruiz family. Michael and Lydia Ruiz lost their oldest son, Alex, in

February when the car he was driving was broadsided by an 18-year-old who had been drinking and smoking marijuana. Most Calistogans know the story: Alex died at the scene; his friend and passenger seriously injured. The drunk driver, Dylan Morse, pleaded guilty to multiple charges against him and was sentenced to three years, four months in prison. His best friend, a passenger in his car, suffered traumatic brain injury and is being cared for by his parents at their Merced home. He can't communicate and must be fed through a feeding tube. He has no control over his large or small motor functions, and no one knows when or if he will recover.

The Ruiz's have filed a civil lawsuit against Safeway Stores Inc. because an already intoxicated Dylan was sold a 12-pack of beer using a fake ID at a Safeway store just minutes before the accident. The Ruiz's attorney has said that businesses that sell to minors are partly responsible for any harm that occurs in the aftermath.

TIPS FOR A SAFE HOLIDAY

- Plan ahead and always designate a sober driver before the holiday party or celebration begins.

- No amount of alcohol is safe before driving. Don't even think about getting behind the wheel of your vehicle if you've been out drinking.

- You can't feel .08! Just because you don't feel "drunk" does not mean you're not over the .08 blood alcohol content limit. Remember, buzzed driving is drunk driving!

- If you are impaired, call a taxi, use mass transit or get a sober

friend or family member to come and get you.

- Or just stay where you are and sleep it off until you are sober.

- Remember, friends don't let friends drink and drive. Take the keys and never let a friend leave your sight if you think they are about to drive while impaired.

- Be a responsible host! Preventing drinking and driving is everybody's responsibility. If you are hosting a party this holiday season, remind your guests to plan ahead and designate their sober driver, always offer alcohol-free beverages and food (high protein is best), stop serving alcohol one hour before the party ends and make sure all of your guests leave with a sober driver.

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