

Eyes on the road

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The News Virginian
Tuesday, April 3, 2007

STAUNTON - Highways are dangerous enough places to be, but they become riskier when work zones are part of the equation.

VDOT kicked off its observance of National Work Zone Awareness Week on Monday, hoping to get the attention of motorists.

Paul Epperly, the director of maintenance for VDOT's Staunton District, said employment in the highway work zone "is as dangerous as firefighting or being a police officer."

But despite the risks for VDOT employees, four of every five fatalities in the work zone involve motorists. Epperly attributed the accidents in work zones to driver inattention and following too closely.

Andreas Anastasiou, a professor of counseling psychology at Mary Baldwin College, said motorists tend to become complacent when driving.

"Driving has become automatic. We do it without thinking," said Anastasiou. "This makes our attention drift away."

Anastasiou said the key is for drivers not to become bogged down in thinking about work or relationship issues while driving.

Accidents can happen even when drivers exercise caution.

Forester Wright oversees the work zone program for VDOT's Staunton District.

Wright said a construction worker accidentally walked in front of a car a few months ago on a Virginia road.

But the worker avoided serious injury because the driver obeyed the work zone flagman and was only driving 20 to 25 miles per hour.

"It could have been worse," he said.

On a more somber note, VDOT on Monday honored the 131 employees who have been killed in accidents while on the job.

The state agency held a wreath laying ceremony at the VDOT Workers' Memorial on Interstate 64 east near Afton.

Opened in fall of 2004, the granite memorial carries the names of all VDOT workers who have died serving Virginia travelers, said Donna Purcell Mayes, VDOT's acting director of communications.



Morteza Salehi, left, Culpeper district administrator for VDOT, and Allan Sumpter, residency administrator in Charlottesville, bow their heads for a moment of silence during a ceremony Monday at the VDOT Workers' Memorial on I-64. (ROSANNE WEBER/Staff)

Mayes said a combination of VDOT workers, family members of the fallen VDOT workers and businesses raised the \$170,000 needed to build the memorial.

Work Zone Tips

- * Slow down and obey the posted speed limit.*
- * Obey warning signs and work zone devices.*
- * Drive with extreme caution and expect the unexpected.*
- * Leave plenty of room between your vehicle and others around you.*

Work Zone Facts

- * Four of every five work zone fatalities is a motorist.*
- * The most common work zone crash is a rear end collision.*
- * There were 2,350 work zone crashes on state-maintained roads in Virginia in 2006, including 1,098 injuries and 17 work zone fatalities.*
- * There were 1,004 work zone crashes on non-state maintained roads in 2006, including 447 injuries and two work zone fatalities.*

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