DRIVING, from A1

Vehicles, however, is working to bring awareness to Floridians about the dangers of distracted driving during Distracted Driver Awareness Month.

Distracted drivers were involved in nearly 39,000 crashes in Florida last year, the state reported. Those crashes resulted in 201 deaths and more than 33,000 injuries.

Those numbers, of course, are only the cases that officers know about, Sgt. Steve Gaskins, of the Florida Highway Patrol, said. In many fatal accidents, investigators may never know whether a distraction was a factor in the crash, he said.

"I have no doubt it happens with more frequency," Gaskins said.

The state's message to all drivers is to keep their eyes on the road, hands on the wheel and their minds on driving.

Texting on a cellphone, eating a hamburger between appointments, or tuning in a radio station can distract drivers. The end result of any distraction could be deadly.

Gaskins said drivers could be ticketed if their actions are clearly being affected by a distraction, such as holding a dog in their lap.

Ken Schwefler, of the Village Rio Ranchero, said distracted driving is an issue, but not a big issue, in The Villages.

He sees more problems with golf cart drivers than with automobile drivers. Primarily, he believes drivers should take better care of children riding in the carts.

"I do see kids in people's laps," Schwefler said. "I think people think of golf carts as more of a toy and they disrespect that. They're not strapping themselves in."

Steve and Terry Allen, of the Village of Country Club Hills, echoed Schwefler's concerns about golf cart drivers.

Steve Allen thinks the problems escalate during the busy season, when snowbirds are in town.

"In the offseason, everything is pretty normal around here," Steve Allen said. "The more people who come in, the worse it gets."

Avoiding distractions behind the wheel

- As a general rule, if you cannot devote your full attention to driving because of some other activity, it's a distraction. Take care of it before or after your trip, not while behind the wheel.
- If another activity demands your attention, instead of trying to attempt it while driving, pull off the road and stop your vehicle in a safe place. To avoid temptation, power down or stow devices before heading out.
- Don't use cellphones while driving — handheld or hands-free — except in absolute emergencies. Never use text messaging, email functions, video games or the Internet with a wireless device, including those built into the vehicle, while driving.
- If you have passengers, enlist their help so you can focus safely on driving.

Source: AAA

During the spring and summer, however, more children visit their grandparents in The Villages. That increases the occurrences of kids sitting on the laps of drivers or passengers, Lt. Nehemiah Wolfe, of the Sumter County Sheriff's Office, said.

Wolfe said these are not traffic violations, and deputies can't cite drivers – unless there is evidence of a reckless condition or a distraction is a factor in a crash. That same rule of thumb applies to most distractions, he said.

Texting while driving, though, was banned last year in Florida.

Texting is one of the major causes of distracted driving. At any given daylight moment, there are 660,000 people who are texting and driving, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates.

Wolfe said he has observed people texting while driving.

"That's one of the biggest no-no's," Wolfe said.

Talking on a cellphone is not prohibited in Florida, but Wolfe said it's common sense to not use phones while driving.

"People should get their priorities straight, and pay more attention to driving their vehicle rather than trying to communicate," Wolfe said.

Of course, vehicles are not the only moving objects sharing the road. Any distraction could not only endanger a driver or passengers but also pedestrians or bicyclists like Coleman, a former Villager for 12 years who now lives in Stonecrest.

Coleman acknowledged she sees a lot of drivers talking on cellphones but thinks it is a generational issue.

"I don't think I see as much of it with the older generation as I do with the young ones," she said. "Maybe we're not as techno-savvy, or maybe we're more careful because we've seen more and done more."

In fact, drivers under the age of 20 have the highest proportion of distraction-related fatal crashes, the state department of motor vehicles reported.

"Anything we can do to drive home the message that distracted driving is dangerous and often deadly is crucial to making our highways safer," department executive director Julie Jones stated in a news release.

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SCOTT, from A1

Scott assured them that he was working diligently to address their concerns, taking them all the way to President Barack Obama.

"When I was at the White House, I said to the president: 'I'm going around the state and I'm talking to seniors and here's what I'm hearing: I'm hearing they're losing their doctors,'" Scott said. "'It's not fair to seniors for you to be cutting Medicare Advantage to be paying for Obamacare.'"

Scott has been touring the state recently hosting discussions with seniors about previously proposed cuts in Medicare Advantage plans.

The cuts would have decreased what Medicare Advantage pays insurers by 1.9 percent next year. However, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services announced Monday that it would actually give the plans a raise of .4 percent.

But seniors still have concerns, Scott said.

"Your heart goes out to these people," Scott said during his visit to The Villages. "They've worked hard all their life, and now they're on Medicare and they're expecting to be taken care of."

As Pat Francis, of the Village of Bridgeport at Miona Shores, listened to Scott talk, she had a question for the governor.

"What can we do to help you?" she asked.

Amy J. Correnti / Daily Sun
Florida Gov. Rick Scott listens to a group gathered for a Medicare Advantage roundtable discussion Wednesday at Sumter Place in The Villages.

"All of us have to be active," Scott replied. "And I tell people all the time: You have to let the White House know your concerns.'"

Francis was impressed by the governor's willingness to listen to his constituents.

"It was excellent because we had a variety of people that gave him information we can work with," Francis said. "I think he's going to try and help us."

Such personal discussions are typical of the governor, said Rich Cole, chairman of the Sumter County Republican Party.

"He's a governor of the people, and he makes himself available," said Cole, of the Village of Glenbrook. "He's reachable. It's not just photo-ops. He listens."

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