

Police boost resources to cut fatalities

BY KEVIN KRAUSE
STAFF WRITER

Helicopters and unmarked cars soon will be a part of the Sheriff's Office's arsenal against Palm Beach County's high number of traffic deaths, which last year topped a six-year high.

But whether those new tools will make a significant dent in the number of fatalities is unclear.

The problem, some critics say, is the mission of the sheriff's Safe Roads task force rather than its resources. The task force focuses too much on speeding and not enough on aggressive driving, appropriate speed limits and the timing of traffic lights, they say.

Sheriff Ed Bieluch, elected a year ago, made traffic safety the priority of his administration. The Safe Roads task force was launched last July with deputies working solely on speed and drunken driving enforce-

■ TASK FORCE CONTINUES ON 2B

Illegal speed limits.
Illegally short yellows.
300,000+ tickets =
record high number
of deaths (2002-03).
Yamato 45 SL should
be 60 MPH. See *.

JKM

Police increase resources to curb rising traffic deaths

■ TASK FORCE

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ment.

But as of Friday, 46 people died in 44 crashes on county roads since January 2002. That's compared with 43 deaths in 39 crashes at the same time a year ago, according to the Florida Highway Patrol. In all of last year, 212 people were killed in 186 crashes — the most since 1994, according to FHP.

In addition, West Palm Beach last year ranked behind Orlando and Tampa-St. Petersburg for the highest number of traffic deaths in the nation, according to a study by The Road Information Program, a private research organization.

Lt. Nancy Grimes, head of the county's task force, said she never expected the initiative to make a dramatic change within a year.

"These things don't happen overnight," she said. "Changing people's behavior is a huge undertaking."

Complicating matters, the task force's operations were interrupted for four months last year by the September terrorist attacks. Most of the task force's deputies were reassigned to security details at the county's seaport and airport until January.

The task force is now close to being fully staffed, with 39 deputies conducting enforcement full time. Two Safe Roads deputies remain at the airport, and one has been called to active duty by his reserve military unit. By the end of spring, 10 more positions will be filled, Grimes said.

Beginning Memorial Day, she said she wants to use the sheriff's helicopter intermit-

COUNTY TRAFFIC DEATHS

Year	Fatalities
1994	216
1995	210
1996	208
1997	210
1998	187
1999	207
2000	192
2001	212

SOURCE: PALM BEACH COUNTY
TRAFFIC ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT
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tently to look for aggressive drivers. And, she's hoping to use grant money in October to pay for unmarked cars as reinforcement.

Yet even though the number of deaths is not decreasing, the bolstered task force's effect certainly is being felt in the county's court system.

Sharon Bock, chief deputy clerk of Court Services, said they went from processing 5,500 sheriff's office-issued traffic tickets in July to 10,000 last month — a record. Since July, sheriff's deputies have written about 50,000 traffic tickets.

As a result, Bock is going to request another five clerk positions in this budget period. She said her office already filled two additional positions to cover the increased workload.

But some say ticket writing will not make the roads safer.

"In most cases, [deputies] are wasting their time because speed is not the cause of crashes," said Greg Mauz, an activist with the National Motorists Association.

Mauz said industry standards determines speed limits based on the design of the road and the speed at which 85 percent of drivers travel, under the premise that motorists can best judge a reasonable speed for the conditions.

But, he said, speed limits in some unincorporated areas are set artificially low because of political pressures, not safety concerns. **illegally low**

* He pointed to Yamato Road west of Jog Road as an example. The stretch of road has a 45 mph speed limit, but 85 percent of drivers travel between 60 mph and 65 mph, according to a county traffic survey.

Mauz also said people aren't given enough time to slow down for traffic lights because the timing of the yellow light is based on the speed limit and not the actual speed most people drive.

"Police are needed for true behavioral problems, such as aggressive and drunk drivers," he said. "Are we looking to improve traffic safety or make money?"

Dan Weisberg, assistant director of the county's traffic engineering department, countered that the speed most drivers travel is only one consideration in setting speed limits. Other factors are topography, road design and location of traffic lights. **Deception.**

Grimes, meanwhile, added that speed increases the chance of serious injury or death in crashes. She also disputed Mauz's contention that the task force is concentrating too much on enforcement and not enough on education and traffic engineering concerns.

She said they consult regularly with traffic engineers about speed limits and lights, and also make deputies available to schools and to help people with child safety seats and other concerns. **LIE**

Kevin Krause can be reached at kkrause@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6604.