

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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KDOT workers at crashes:

They've seen the toll, they've felt the toll

Put the Brakes on Fatalities Day is Oct. 10, but it's important to focus on traffic safety and saving lives all year long. A special thanks to Kansas Department of Transportation workers across the state who work to maintain the highways and, when requested, assist at crash scenes.

By Tim Potter, KDOT Public Affairs Manager in south central Kansas

Over the years, in crash after crash on Kansas highways, they've seen bodies covered by sheets -- and worse.

One remembers a car seat outside a mangled vehicle. It's imprinted in his memory.

They've witnessed grief, up close -- a woman looking for her sister.

They're not law enforcement or rescue crews. But they are among the first responders. They are Kansas Department of Transportation crews who are asked to provide traffic control at crashes so rescuers and law enforcement can focus on the emergency and so traffic can be directed around the wreckage.

At all hours, in all kinds of weather, these KDOT workers see the toll. They experience it. From this exposure, they have a unique perspective on the importance of traffic safety.

KDOT workers across the state share their experiences as part of the national safety campaign Put the Brakes on Fatalities Day, which focuses on all types of traffic safety. Here are their accounts:

Wamego superintendent

Jeff Romine, Highway Maintenance Superintendent with the Wamego Area Shop, remembers an early morning crash that closed a highway. It took the Kansas Highway Patrol hours to document the scene. It took fire trucks a while to wash biohazards off the pavement.

As a superintendent, Romine goes to crashes to help direct his crew. "I just get up and go," no matter the hour, he says. He tries to keep the new workers from having close exposure.

Even when KDOT workers flagging traffic are stationed relatively far from the wreckage, sometimes they come face to face with relatives of the people injured or killed. The loved ones want to get closer. They want to talk to officers investigating. Romine remembers a husband who arrived to see about his wife. She had just died in the crash.

The man waited until an officer could break away from the investigation to talk to him. During those 20 minutes, the KDOT workers tried to gently engage the man -- without saying anything insensitive. They passed the time in small talk, Romine remembers.

After responding to so many crashes, Romine sees patterns. He learns from law enforcement some of the factors suspected in the crashes. One of the most common, he says, seems to be driver distraction. "I think the biggest thing is the cell phones," he says. "And then, of course, the seat belts come in. More than not, they weren't wearing a seat belt, are the ones who got killed."

It's impossible not to be affected, Romine says. "The worst ones to take is when you got a family involved. Because it's just like your family. It could have been you," he says.

"There was one where a baby got killed, and that bothered me for a long time." He was doing traffic control.

"When I got there, there was a child seat there, outside the vehicle."

Wellington supervisor

Kim Brownlee is Wellington Subarea Supervisor. He recalls a fatal accident that left a long trail of debris. It was at night, so it wasn't easy to see.

Area Superintendent Greg Dixon asked the Wellington crew to re-walk a ditch by the crash site the next day. "Because he said the family is going to want to go back out there," Brownlee recalls.

During their check, they found a piece of human remains and called a sheriff's deputy.

A relative of the victim learned about the recovery and voiced her appreciation, Brownlee said.

"Thank you for going back out and doing what you did," she told him.

Topeka maintenance superintendent

Dave Studebaker, Highway Maintenance Superintendent in Topeka, says distraught people show up at crash sites. But KDOT workers aren't in a position to convey information to them. That's law enforcement's role. Still, the KDOT workers are often the first people that relatives approach.

Studebaker remembers helping with traffic control after one crash when a woman ran up to the KDOT workers.

He told her he couldn't let her move closer, for her safety.

"That's my sister," the woman told him.

The woman became upset, and he told her: "I understand you." He said he would ask for a sheriff's deputy to come over to her. "I just got on the radio and told them to come up there," he recalls.

In a situation like that, Studebaker says, the KDOT workers must be respectful and compassionate.

"Unfortunately," he says, "it did turn out to be her sister."

Altamont supervisor

Kevin Crain, Altamont Subarea Supervisor, has worked for KDOT for about 22 years. He also is a former EMT with Cherryvale Fire/EMS.

Earlier in his KDOT career, before he was a supervisor, Crain went out to set up traffic control after a multiple-fatality crash.

When he arrived, Crain recalls, “Bodies are still on the ground with sheets over them, and you have to drive around that.”

Now, he goes to crash sites as a supervisor. “A lot of times, I’ll roll up and there’s still bodies in the car,” he says.

“I tell my new employees, ‘You don’t know what you’re going to find on the side of the road, and you don’t know what you’re going to drive into. You have to be prepared for about anything out there.’”

And there’s another thing about responding to crashes, he says: “When you work in these communities, it’s a small world.

“It could be your family, a buddy’s family, it could be your next-door neighbor. You’re hoping it’s not the vehicle it is.”

Having to flag traffic at a crash site means having to work in all conditions. “I’ve flagged at midnight in heavy fog for a fatality accident,” Crain says. “We’ve done ‘em in pouring-down rain.”

Accidents happen at all hours. “When we get a phone call in the middle of the night, you kind of wake up, and you go in ‘Go mode,’” Crain says.

When he arrives at the crash site, he talks to law enforcement to check on whether bodies are present. He wants to protect or at least prepare the crew for what they might encounter.

Depending on the highway configuration, KDOT traffic control flaggers can be hundreds of feet to 2 to 3 miles from the crash site. “We try to be as far back as we can -- you don’t want to be in the way,” he says.

“We’ll do whatever we can do to alleviate the problem.”

After reacting to crashes and being exposed to what happened, he says, a KDOT crew has to be careful not to discuss it in front of others out in the community – because you never know who might be listening: It could be the loved one of the crash victim. When KDOT workers visit a convenience store or the café, someone might ask about the wreck they just handled.

KDOT employees do not want to unnecessarily cause emotional hurt to someone. “If you work some of these wrecks, you have to be mindful,” he says. “Kind of what you see here -- what happens out on the highway -- stays here with us.”

Being exposed to crashes “does affect you,” Crain says.

“Some of the wrecks you have to deal with over the years; you still see them clear as day.”

For him, he says, “It’s not something that wakes you up with nightmares, but it’s still something you see vividly in your mind.”

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