

Battling the scourge of drunken driving is ongoing

Bill Elliott For The Press
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(This spring, The Press asked community leaders for updates on their efforts as they fight for change.)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been flooded with bad news about the mounting death toll, thousands of closed businesses and millions of unemployed. Still, our collective efforts seem to be helping, as self-isolation, practicing social distancing, and wearing masks are “flattening the curve” of new infections, and slowly businesses are beginning to open.

We also have seen some unexpected bright spots. Air pollution is reportedly down, and drunken driving has declined as fewer cars are on the road. Which leads us to this question: If a pandemic can prevent drunken driving, why can't we?

We all thank our doctors, nurses, police, first responders, food-service workers and delivery people for keeping us safe. For the past 20 years, the John R. Elliott HERO Campaign has applauded another category of unsung heroes: designated drivers. In addition to police, they also are on the front lines, protecting us from drunken driving tragedies.

Annually, impaired drivers kill more than 10,000 Americans and injure 200,000 more, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). The Department of Transportation estimates 110 million drunken driving incidents occur each year, and more than 1.5 million DUI arrests.

Twenty years ago, we lost our son to a drunken driver. John had just graduated near the top of his class from the United States Naval Academy and was preparing to enter Naval Flight School.

He was driving home from Annapolis for his mother's birthday when he was killed in a head-on collision with a driver who had been arrested earlier the same evening, then released to a friend who allowed him to resume driving while still intoxicated.

John would have accomplished great things had he lived. He was a natural leader, with an infectious sense of humor. They called him “Jumbo” because of his big smile and even bigger heart. In his senior year he was voted the Outstanding “HERO” in his class for his service as a Human Education Resource Officer.

In October 2000, we established the John R. Elliott HERO Campaign to promote designated driving and carry on John’s positive spirit of service with the hope that we could prevent others from experiencing the pain we have endured.

In early 2001, John’s Law was enacted, requiring police throughout the state to impound the cars of those arrested for DUI for 12 hours. Each year, according to N.J. State Police statistics, approximately 30,000 cars are impounded under John’s Law.

The HERO Campaign has grown into a multistate movement. Based at Stockton University, we have partnered with schools and colleges, highway safety agencies, police departments, NFL and Major League Baseball teams and bar and tavern owners. More than 100,000 supporters have taken our online HERO Pledge not to drink and drive. A recent poll at Stockton’s Hughes Center for Public Policy found that many residents of Atlantic and Cape May counties have become designated drivers after seeing our HERO Campaign billboards and bumper stickers or participating in our annual HERO Walk.

In 2019, we partnered with the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, Uber and The Press of Atlantic City to launch the region’s first HERO Safe Ride Program, providing free rides home from Atlantic City-area bars and taverns during the holiday season. We plan to resume the program once bars and casinos reopen. A growing number of police departments have wrapped patrol cars with the HERO message, and more than 30 bars, clubs and casinos participated in last summer’s HEROtini Mocktail Challenge to create great-tasting nonalcoholic drinks for designated drivers.

This summer we will distribute 1,000 HERO masks to bar and restaurant servers to keep everyone safe and remind them to have a designated driver.

Each year we console new victim families who have lost loved ones to DUI crashes. We help give meaning to their losses by displaying pictures of their loved ones on highway billboards, reminding everyone that designated drivers save lives.

Eventually the current nightmare will be behind us and we will resume our lives under the “new normal.” It also would be a dream come true if that new world included the automatic use of designated drivers so we would not need to put up billboards for any new DUI victims.

To learn more about how you can help the HERO Campaign prevent drunk driving, go to herocampaign.org or the HERO Campaign Facebook page.

(Bill Elliott is chairman and CEO of the John R. Elliott HERO Campaign for Designated Drivers.)

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