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New pedestrian crosswalk law resulted in more fines, more warnings, and perhaps fewer deaths

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By BRIAN IANIERI, Staff Writer | Posted: Monday, October 4, 2010



File photo of a pedestrian crosswalk in Longport, summer of 2010

In the first test of the state's new traffic law requiring motorists to stop for pedestrians in crosswalks, police issued many more summonses and warnings this year than in the previous year, municipal court figures provided Monday by the state judiciary show.

Between April and September, Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland and Ocean counties recorded 1,074 offenses, a 245 percent increase over the 311 summonses issued during the same period in 2009, the judiciary statistics show.

The law, which took effect in April, requires motorists to stop for pedestrians in crosswalks. Traffic safety officials said the previous wording of the law, which required motorists to "yield" to pedestrians, was unclear. The new law took effect following a dramatic increase in pedestrian fatalities in 2009 after three years of decline.

There have been fewer pedestrian fatalities in the state so far this year.

Pedestrian fatalities in New Jersey dropped 19 percent, from 115 to 93, during the period from January through September, compared with the same time frame last year, said Pam Fischer, director of the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety.

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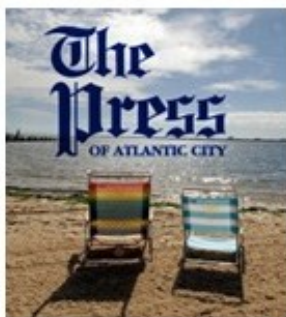
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There have been five pedestrian fatalities in Atlantic County, six in Ocean County, one in Cumberland County and none in Cape May County so far this year, the State Police Fatal Accident Investigation Unit says.

Fischer said she would not attribute the drop specifically to the new crosswalk law.

"There's a whole bunch of tools in the toolbox, and one of them is the change in the law. We're really trying to change that 'us against them' mentality," she said of drivers and pedestrians.

Fischer said much of the approach is about public awareness.

"The message is quite clear," she said. "If you put a car and a pedestrian together and there's a conflict, nobody wins. But the pedestrian is less likely to get out unscathed."

The law has been referred to as "Casey's Law," named for 21-year-old Casey Feldman, of Springfield, Pa., who was killed July 21, 2009, crossing at 14th Street and Central Avenue in Ocean City.

Ocean City held four days of police checks over the summer - two in July and two in August - and issued 514 warnings to motorists and 506 warnings to pedestrians, Lt. Steven Ang said.

The city installed 15 pedestrian safety signs and painted more crosswalks on the beach blocks as the law took effect, he said.

When the new law was rolled out, some motorists complained it would embolden pedestrians to step recklessly into the street.

"I'll say this a thousand times, it doesn't matter what the law says, who has the right of way or who doesn't. The bottom line is everyone has to slow down, be a

little more courteous and use common sense," Ang said. "That law for pedestrians doesn't do any good if you have the right of way and get hit by a 3,000-pound car."

Ang said that anecdotally, Ocean City seemed to have a small increase in fender-benders that occurred when one car stopped for a pedestrian in an intersection but the trailing car did not. But something else was even more dangerous, he said.

"One of the most dangerous things we see, you have a car that's stopped in the lane of travel, and the car behind them thinks they stopped for a left hand turn, and will pass them on the right. It's an extremely hazardous maneuver for motorists. It's in most cases an illegal maneuver," Ang said. "When we were running our educational programs, we observed that more times than we'd like to have seen."

Surf City Mayor Leonard Connors said the law should be modified.

"People figure they're in a crosswalk and they can do whatever they want," he said. "That's the other problem. They just stick their hand out - stop - and if the motorist doesn't see him, you've got a problem."

"I didn't know it was broke before they fixed it," he said.

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Connors said he has seen pedestrians, familiar with the crosswalk law, step off the curb and expect the cars to stop. But out-of-town motorists unfamiliar with the law would not know what the pedestrian was doing, he said.

A statewide awareness campaign was launched this year to bring attention to the law and pedestrian safety with the help of state grants and federal funding.

Linwood and Northfield police in Atlantic County and Vineland police in Cumberland County participated in the "Cops in Crosswalks" program this summer, among 13 police departments in the state using \$8,000 in federal funds to deploy decoy pedestrians from mid-July to mid-September.

"We wrote a lot of warnings, many more warnings than we wrote summonses," Linwood police Chief James Baker said. "Generally, we wrote a summons when it was someone who had more (violations such as) cell phones and seat belts."

Baker said the law's effect has been apparent.

"I have seen more and more motorists stopped for pedestrians in crosswalks than ever before," he said. "I do believe it's working, but it's a cultural change."

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Crosswalk citations

Municipal court offenses from April to September for failure to stop for a pedestrian in a crosswalk

Atlantic County: 406 in 2010; 207 in 2009

Cape May County: 69 in 2010; 42 in 2009

Cumberland County: 429 in 2010; 6 in 2009

Ocean County: 170 in 2010; 56 in 2009

Source: State judiciary