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Virginia Law Enforcement Mobilizes In Statewide Sobriety Checkpoint Blitz *2006 Spike in Local Alcohol-Related Traffic Fatalities Signals Warning*

Richmond, VA – In preparation for countless Virginian motorists hitting the highways for the long Labor Day weekend – historically the third deadliest drunk driving holiday of the year – *Checkpoint Strikeforce* launched a five-month statewide campaign to raise public awareness about drunk driving. Attorney General Robert McDonnell helped kick off the million-dollar campaign atop an overpass of one of Virginia’s main arteries, Interstate 95.

State and local data was analyzed at the launch event and indicated a 16-percent increase in alcohol-related traffic fatalities in Virginia in 2006. In 2006, Virginia had 374 fatalities and 7,543 injuries in alcohol-related crashes. Virginia saw more than a 14-percent (14.1%) decline between 2002 and 2005 (375 in 2002; 361 in 2003; 343 in 2004; and 322 in 2005) in drunk driving deaths. Despite this data increase, there has been a trend of decreased fatalities over the past five years (and since the 2002 debut of Virginia’s *Checkpoint Strikeforce* campaign). The increases in 2006 are a startling contrast to the significant strides made in recent years to combat drinking and driving via *Checkpoint Strikeforce* and other initiatives.

This rise should serve to remind not only law enforcement and government officials, but also the public that eliminating drunk driving is an ongoing struggle and everyone must remain vigilant. In 2006, 29,595 persons were convicted of driving under the influence (DUI) – a five percent increase from 2005, according to the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles Highway Safety Office (DMV). To put this sobering figure into perspective, this translates into someone being found guilty of drunk driving every 19 minutes in the Commonwealth over the course of the year.

“Last year should be a wake up call for Virginia about drunk driving. It should remind us all that drunk driving remains a serious problem on our roadways,” said Attorney General Robert McDonnell. “The fight to eliminate drunk driving is far from over and we will continue to prosecute drivers that endanger others by failing to act responsibly.”

Throughout the rest of 2007, Virginia law enforcement agencies will hold a minimum of one sobriety checkpoint and or saturation patrol every week across the state. Through the utilization of these anti-DUI enforcement efforts, the statewide campaign works to keep impaired drivers off Virginia’s roadways. Studies performed for the Arlington, Virginia-based Insurance Institute for Highway Safety show that sobriety checkpoints can reduce alcohol-related crashes by as much as 20-percent. Deploying sobriety checkpoints and patrols when and where drunk driving is most likely to occur both deters motorists from driving under the influence and arrests those who do. During the 2007 Labor Day weekend, state police will participate in several enforcement campaigns, including Checkpoint Strikeforce, aimed at promoting highway safety, enforcing traffic laws and deterring impaired driving.

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Virginians are also seeing the difference and supporting checkpoints. A July 2007 public opinion survey of 700 Virginia drivers, conducted for *Checkpoint Strikeforce* by the Richmond-based polling firm MWR Strategies, found that 89-percent of drivers support the anti-DUI initiative. Moreover, nearly three-quarters of Virginia drivers surveyed perceive drunk drivers as a dangerous threat with the majority (71-percent) saying drunk drivers are among the most serious dangers they face on the road.

In addition to sobriety checkpoints and patrols, Virginia's *Checkpoint Strikeforce* campaign is employing ads in combination with other statewide outreach efforts in a robust \$1,000,000 effort to remind citizens of the many dangers and consequences of impaired driving. Throughout the next several months, nearly 25,000 radio and television spots will run throughout the Commonwealth and will target the most feared result (77-percent) of drunk drivers, killing or injuring someone. The campaign is supported locally by a grant from the Virginia DMV.

Listen to the ads and get more information at <http://www.checkpointstrikeforce.net/educate.html>

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