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PUBLIC SAFETY

Put away the phone

Distracted driving a growing nuisance, police say

By Robert Connelly

GateHouse Media Illinois

MONMOUTH — Local police say distracted driving is catching up to speeding as the number one cause of accidents.

Monmouth police Sgt. Joe Bratcher, who oversees first shift patrol, said that distracted driving, specifically cellphone use while driving, continues to be an issue a few years after it became against state law to use a phone in one's hand while driving.

"I think enforcement is tough to do because when you're in the marked squad car driving down the street, (drivers) see the marked squad car and put (their phone) down," he said.

"It's the mentality of 'it's not going to happen to me' ... it only takes two seconds to swerve into the other lane" and be in an accident.

Monmouth Police Department is one of about 300 local law enforcement

agencies across the state that are stepping up distracted driving enforcement this week. Gov. Bruce Rauner declared this week, April 24 to April 28, as Illinois Distracted Driving Awareness Week to bring attention to the issue, dangers and consequences of distracted driving.

Patrols are occurring at varying hours,

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but Bratcher did say there is a focus on when schools are letting students in and out.

"They are random. There's no set rotation or anything like that. We usually try to gear some of our patrols towards the schools," he said.

Officers are also working in units where one person operates out of an unmarked vehicle and lets

nearby authorities know of violations so they can pull over the person in a marked squad car, Bratcher said.

Police are "focused everywhere. We have a high traffic area out there on (U.S. Highways) 67 and 34, but distracted driving usually happens on the city streets and following too closely out there on the bypass."

The push for the aware-

ness month came from the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police. It is supported by AAA, Illinois State Police, SafetyServe.com, the National Safety Council, the Illinois Insurance Association, private sector supporters in the state along with nearly 300 law enforcement and fire agencies.

Bratcher said officers usually average one ticket

an hour for traffic enforcement details, which includes seat belt violations, distracted driving and speeding.

He emphasized that the number one cause of death for persons between the ages of 16 and 22 remains traffic accidents.

"The number one most preventable thing in the world, the United States, is accidents ... they need to take it seriously and this is real," Bratcher said.