

# TIA and law enforcement agencies join forces for Operation Ghost Rider

## The Macomb Daily



The distracted driving billboard designed by Johnathon Putrus Jr., a ninth grader at Dakota High School in Macomb Township will be seen throughout Michigan during April's Distracted Driving Awareness Month. Photo courtesy of TIA

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There's a billboard to remind drivers to put their phones down because it's the law.

If that's not enough to deter distracted driving law enforcement officers from state, county, and local agencies Monday will begin conducting Operation Ghost Rider throughout Michigan.

"Despite knowing the risks, distracted drivers continue to put themselves and the innocent people around them in danger," said Jim Santilli, CEO of TIA and chairman of the Governor's Traffic Safety Advisory Commissions' Distracted Driving Action Team. "Sadly, many people have lost a loved one to a completely preventable behavior. We can all do our part by keeping our eyes on the road and hands on the wheel at all times."

Operation Ghost Rider uses unmarked spotter vehicles, which contain a law enforcement passenger. When the spotters observe a distracted driver, they radio a fully marked law enforcement unit to initiate a traffic stop. The goal of the annual lifesaving campaign initiated by the Transportation Improvement Association (TIA) is to reduce distracted driving deaths and injuries.

Last year, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed into law a bill making it illegal to manually use a cell phone or other mobile electronic device while operating a vehicle on Michigan roads. Under the law, a driver cannot hold or support a phone or other device with any part of their hands, arms, or shoulders. Even if a cell phone or other device is mounted on a dashboard or connected to a vehicle's built-in system, a driver cannot use their hands to operate it beyond a single touch.

Those who do not follow the law face a number of fines: 1st violation, \$100 fine and/or 16 hours of community service; 2nd or subsequent violations, \$250 fine and/or 24 hours of community service; 3 violations within a 3-year period, complete a driving-improvement course.

Fines are doubled if a traffic crash occurs and the at-fault driver was holding or manually using a mobile device while operating the vehicle.

Violators can also be cited for careless driving, which is a three-point offense and a civil infraction punishable by a fine.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation drivers who use a hand-held device are four times more likely to get into a crash serious enough to cause injury. Texting drivers are 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash.

A billboard reminding motorists in Macomb County of the law was designed by Johnathon Putrus Jr., a student at Dakota High School. A second billboard designed by Brandy Cavanaugh, a student at Mercy High School has also been placed in areas around Oakland County. These were the results of a TIA contest made possible through a \$40,000 grant provided by State Farm challenging Michigan high school students to design a distracted driving awareness billboard to remind the public of the hands-free law.

Operation Ghost Rider was revealed at a press conference in Macomb County in 2017. Several mobilizations will be scheduled during 2024.