

Driving while intoxicated remains a problem. The federal government, state governments, and advocacy groups have been conducting education and enforcement campaigns since the 1980s with the aim of reducing drunk driving. On television, radio, social media, and billboards are messages aimed at convincing people to make the right choice and avoid driving when they're impaired.

Over the last 4 decades, progress has been made. According to national statistics, the rate of drunk driving fatalities has decreased 55% since 1982. However, impaired driving still accounts for more than 13,000 deaths each year across our nation's highways. In Benton County over the last 5 years, law enforcement agencies have annually made an average of 202 impaired driving arrests and responded to 29 impaired driving related crashes. Enforcement and education efforts across Minnesota continue with the goal of bringing each of those numbers down to zero.

It is easy to become desensitized to statistics. We are inundated with statistics and data from every corner of our daily life. Soon enough, 13,000 deaths each year becomes just another number we see scrolling by on our phones. These numbers have more meaning when they have a name. Names like Lindsay Cardinal, a 35-year-old mother of 3 who was killed by an intoxicated driver on Hwy 23 in Foley in 2017 or Kevin Oehmen, a 47-year-old man who was killed by a drunk driver in 2023 as he was walking on Benton Drive in Sauk Rapids. These are just two examples of families, friends, and loved ones whose lives were forever changed due to the actions of an impaired driver.

The solution to our impaired driving problem lies in a choice. It is a choice that thousands upon thousands of drivers make each day; the choice to drive sober. Designate a driver when your group goes out for the night, find a lift home from a friend, call for a taxi or rideshare, or sober up before heading home for the night. Make the choice to formulate a plan before the night starts and stick with the plan to get everyone home safely. While out, make the choice to be a good friend too. If you think someone else is impaired, make sure they find a sober ride home. Be that hero that is willing to do the right thing or be just a phone call away and willing to go the extra mile to ensure everyone gets home safely.

A DWI conviction is very costly. However, the financial costs pale in comparison to the loss suffered by the victims of impaired drivers. Make the right choice, the simple choice, the powerful choice; drive sober. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.