

Hospice Bans Distracted Driving

By MARCELLA PEYRE-FERRY

Cell phones, blue tooth and texting have become a part of everyday life, but Willow Tree Hospice employees are keeping the technology turned off - while they are driving. In June, following educational training, a new policy went into effect banning the use of electronic devices while driving during work hours. Failure to comply with the policy can mean immediate dismissal.

The new policy came into effect after the Director of Social Services Ellen Good lost her brother and sister-in-law in an horrific traffic accident with a teen driver who was texting while at the wheel. "She really took it on as a mission," said Christian Coll of Willow Tree Hospice.

Her niece Jacy was also severely injured in the crash, which occurred on her graduation day. While Jacy's life was changed forever by the incident, she has gone on to be an advocate against driving while distracted.

Jacy Good has appeared on Opera, and has even spoken at the U.N. "It's compelling," Coll said. "This is a beautiful girl left with an



Photo by Marcella Peyre Ferry

Associates of the Willow Tree Hospice gather for a picture. From left, sitting, are Administrator Christine Coll and Director of social Services Ellen Good; standing from left, Rev. Gayle Reuter and Director of Volunteer Services Melinda Chichester.

arm that doesn't work and her thought is that she was called to do this."

A Nationwide Insurance poll showed 81 percent of the public admitted to talking on a cell phone

while driving and the NHTSA estimates that 12 percent of drivers at

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Hospice says 'no' to distractions

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any point during the day are talking on cell phones while driving.

Drivers who use cell phones are four times more likely to be involved in a crash. Studies show that there is no difference in the cognitive distraction between hand held and hands free devices. The idea that we can multitask is a myth. Cell phone users have slower reaction times than drivers with .08 blood alcohol levels and are slower to react to cars breaking in front of them.

Some states have put laws in place against the use of cell phones while driving, but Pennsylvania has not done so as yet. Some companies like Willow Tree have gone ahead and set policies of their own.

"I really believe in my heart of hearts that we should all be doing this," Coll said.

Willow Tree's policy goes farther than other employers by including hands-free calling in the ban as well as hand held devices. "Even the distraction of talking on the blue tooth is so significant," Coll said. "It's clear distracted driving puts you at risk, even on blue tooth."

When considering the ban, Coll looked at extensive evidence and statistics including material from the Pennsylvania Council on Safety and the National Safety Council. With

the information assembled, employees went through a training session that made them aware of how serious the problem is.

"It raised my consciousness. I was floored by the statistics," Coll said.

The hospice, based at Jenners Pond in West Grove, covers all of southern Chester County and into Delaware County so their nurses must travel, but they are never much more than 30 minutes from their destinations, a time that should not make a big difference in responding to a phone call.

Willow Tree nurses are expected to turn off and put away their phones so they will not be tempted while they are driving. Voice mail messages have been modified so callers will know that the phone is not being answered until the person is finished driving. Because emergencies can come up, nurses on call can answer a phone, but instead of talking they acknowledge the call then call the person back once they have found a safe place to pull over and stop.

Cell phones and all sorts of elec-

tronic devices have become so much a part of everyday life that Coll did not know what sort of reaction to expect to the new policy. "They all embraced it," she is pleased to say. "They will tell you it's so nice not to rush to the phone."

"I love it," Rev. Gayle Reuter, director of chaplain services said. "Nothing is an emergency any more. There's time for everything."

Good was also pleased by the response. "We had one nurse who would not talk on her cell phone already while driving," she said adding that talking on a phone can be so distracting that it can cause accidents to people even while they are walking.

Good has taken the presentation that Willow Tree employees saw to local high schools, and is willing to bring it to other groups that are interested. Coll would like individuals as well as employers to think about the issue. "I think everyone should consider learning more about it and the statistics," she said.