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It's the law, except for cops

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By William Kaempffer, Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — Few would debate that seat belts save lives, but not all police departments require their officers to wear them.

While state law mandates personnel in fire engines to wear safety belts, the same law exempts police officers from having to buckle up while responding to emergency calls, which one study determined made officers three times more likely to die in the event of a crash.

Many departments in the region do have some type of a policy in place. Some do not.

“As a matter of policy and procedure, most officers will wear seat belts because we see what occurs when you don't,” said state police Lt. J. Paul Vance. But in the fast-moving world of policing, he added, it's difficult to have a “black and white” rule.

Safety has been at the forefront in many people's minds since the Sept. 9 crash that killed city police Sgt. Dario “Scott” Aponte, 43, and critically injured Officer Diane Gonzalez, 47, when their cruisers collided as they responded to the same call.

New Haven's 1987 General Order makes reference to the state seat belt statute, but does not overrule it. A number of local departments and the state police say they require officers to wear safety belts while on patrol.

In Orange, Police Chief Robert Gagne said his officers are required to wear their seat belts when they're on the job.

“It's been long-term safety policy,” he said.

Madison's acting police chief, Robert Nolan, said he also requires officers to wear seat belts. They can take them off if they are getting close to a location believed to be dangerous, he said.

North Haven police follow the state law, requiring officers to wear seat belts unless responding to emergencies, Police Chief James X. DiCarlo said. “I wear mine, no matter what. I don't know what other police officers do,” DiCarlo said.

The Boston Police Department, while encouraging seat belt use, does not require it.

“The reality of the situation, that the officers are in and out of cruisers, it's not mandated,” said Boston Officer James Kenneally. “They like to see it, but obviously given the nature of the profession, you can't mandate it.”

The state police, which is investigating the Aponte/Gonzalez crash, has not publicly revealed whether the officers were wearing their seat belts. And if they weren't, it's unknown whether the belts would have saved them from their serious injuries. At least one of them was partially ejected from a cruiser.

But statistics involving line-of-duty deaths reveal that automobile accidents account for more deaths than any other cause.

In 2007, 74 of the 181 police officers who died in the line of duty were killed in automobile-related accidents, although some were on foot when they were struck. Sixty-eight were shot.

In 2006, 61 died in automobile accidents; 56 died from assaults, according to figures from the Law Enforcement Memorial Fund.

A 2005 study published in the Journal of Trauma concluded that unbelted officers were 2.6 times more likely to die if their patrol car crashed than officers who were using their seat belts.

Conducted at the University of Buffalo and funded in part by the Federal Highway Administration, researchers analyzed hundreds of cruiser crashes between 1997 and 2001 involving a fatality and in which data was available about whether the occupants were wearing safety belts.

Results showed that 40.4 percent of the unbelted occupants died, compared with 15.5 percent of those wearing seat belts, according to the study.

One veteran New Haven supervisor said he doesn't generally wear a seat belt. Officers have a lot of gear on their work belts — a gun, baton, pepper spray, radio, handcuffs — and equipment can get tangled.

"Me, I don't wear one. It's uncomfortable with the bullet-proof vest, duty belt, you're in and out of the car quite often."

The supervisor, who didn't want to be named, said he will clip on his belt sometimes if it becomes evident that he will end up in a pursuit and had mixed feelings of whether the department should revisit the policy.

"We have stats: Wearing a seat belt saves lives," he said. "I think we all know that."

Milford cops are required to buckle up, said Milford Officer Vaughn Dumas — it's become second nature for most, he said — although it's not uncommon for them to unbuckle as they pull up to a scene, particularly when it appears they will have to exit the car quickly.

New York Police Department's policy dictates that seat belts must be worn "unless exigent circumstances exist."

"It's enforced," said New York Detective Martin Speechley. "We have inspection teams go around checking on all the officers, making sure they're following procedures and that's one of the things we check on."

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