

# Youth Speaking Out to Turn Tragedy into Positive Action

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## *Best Practice Ideas to Have a Positive Influence on Teen Driving Behaviors and Attitudes Following a Tragedy*

### **A Sensitive Issue:**

When a tragedy occurs in a community involving a young person, the community is devastated and wants to take action. But, knowing how to steer the adversity into positive action while staying sensitive to the family members and friends of the student(s) killed, can be overwhelming. These tragedies, while upsetting, are important teaching moments and should be a time for schools and communities to work together to educate students and help prevent future tragedies. When programs are done in a positive way and with the safety of the community's youth as a focus, they will help the community heal while also creating a safer driving culture for everyone.

### **Positive, Educational, Effective Action:**

- **Focus:** To bring the students and community together in remembering their lost classmate(s) through positive programs that honor their memory and influence students to commit to driving safely and responsibly.
- **Goal:** To educate students and young drivers in the county/city about their risks in a motor vehicle and how to reduce those risks in order to change behaviors and help prevent crashes, injuries, and fatalities.
- **Involvement:** In addition to involving the community, include the family and friends of the student(s) and allow each family member to contribute to the program(s) in their own special way. This allows the families a way to honor their loved ones through action, and to help make a greater impact on the students at the school. (Some family members will be comfortable speaking out and taking a visible role, while others will only want to join in more subtle ways such as signing a pledge, planting a tree, or helping make signs.)

### **Best Practices for Positive Action:**

1. **Sponsor a special program,** tribute, or memorial to remember and honor the student(s) killed.

#### Ideas:

- Pledge banner signing in memory of the student(s) that includes a personal pledge to be a safer driver in his/her memory. Students and adults who sign the pledge would be given a wrist band, key chain, etc. to remind them of their commitment. *Example: "In memory of {student(s) name}, I pledge to always buckle up, obey the speed limit, and drive responsibly and distraction-free."* (Refer to program attachment from Jefferson Forest H.S.)
- Creating a symbolic remembrance, such as planting a tree at the school in memory of the student(s); erecting a sign with a safety message at the exit to the parking lot in their memory; dedicating their parking spaces to their memory and making those spaces rewards

for students who exhibit their character; etc. (Refer to attached program from Brooke Point High School parking space memorial.)

- Develop a campaign or program named in their memory that focuses on influencing students to drive safely and responsibly. (Refer to programs from Middlesex, Staunton River, and Jefferson Forest High Schools.)
  - Candlelight vigils, balloon releases, pledge banner signings and other ceremonies are also good ways to end an event/program to bring attention back to the student(s) killed and give classmates and family an outlet to remember them in a special way.
  - Designing and selling t-shirts in memory of the student(s) with an imprinted safety message. Funds raised can support purchasing a symbolic remembrance or fund a traffic safety program in their memory.

2. **Sponsor educational programs** that educate students about their risks in a motor vehicle, the consequences of those risks, and how to reduce those risks.

Ideas:

- Project Impact, VCU Medical Center: A high impact mock crash, followed by a trauma bay with doctors and nurses showing what happens in the ER when crash victims arrive.
  - Focus the program as a way to remember the student(s) killed and to help prevent future tragedies. Kick it off as a positive action for students to honor the memory of their classmates by committing to learn about and practice safer and more responsible driving habits and attitudes.
  - Talk with the Project Impact Coordinator about ways to keep the program sensitive and respectful due to the recent tragedy.
  - Allow students to opt out if they feel it will be too emotional. Provide study hall or supervised classroom for them to go to during the program.
  - End the program with a positive take action ceremony or tribute to enable the students to honor their classmate who has passed away. This action will also empower them to make their own commitment to being safer and more responsible drivers and to help end fatalities in the community.
- Arrive Alive and other YOVASO Campaigns
- Educational/motivational assemblies with personal stories and tributes to the students killed.
- Refer to activity guide in YOVASO Membership Manual for additional ideas.
- Be creative, be interactive, and include elements of fun to engage the student body.

★ **Key Points to Remember:**

1. Begin and end your safety initiatives by emphasizing the program's focus on honoring the memory of the student(s) killed by working to prevent crashes, injuries and fatalities in the community
2. End programs with a ceremony that allows the students to take action and remember the teens:
  - Pledge signing with wrist band or some take home reminder of their pledge
  - Balloon release or candlelight vigil
  - A unique idea that is personal to students at the school or to the student(s) killed