

Tragedies from recent storm stay on our minds

Friday, February 23, 2007 12:01 AM CST

Driving conditions during the recent winter storms were treacherous. For five residents - including three teens - in the Pantagraph area, those conditions were deadly.

The loss of anyone's life is tragic, but the death is more profoundly felt when the victim is a young person, just entering the prime of life.

The death of the three teens from El Paso-Gridley and Fieldcrest high schools hit particularly hard - not only in the small schools and communities where "everyone knows everyone" but even among strangers who can see their own children, relatives or friends in the young faces of those who died.

Meanwhile, people in the Prairie Central High School area are mourning the death of another teen, a 16-year-old whose body was found in a field after he attended a party where underage drinking occurred.

A crash earlier this month in Oswego, in Kendall County, took the lives of five teen-agers. Police say a 23-year-old was behind the wheel.

Another Fieldcrest student died in a traffic accident in June near Wenona.

The crashes remind us of the string of traffic accidents in Tazewell County that have taken the lives of 15 teens.

School officials at Fieldcrest and El Paso-Gridley should be commended for the way in which they responded to the tragedy. They had assemblies and made counselors available to students at the same time faculty and staff were dealing with grief themselves.

The crash brings to mind efforts by Secretary of State Jesse White and state Sen. Bill Brady of Bloomington to imposed tougher restrictions and requirements on teen drivers.

There's no way of knowing whether those rules could have prevented this accident. Road conditions were rough for everyone, young and experienced drivers alike.

All three fatal accidents involved one vehicle losing control and colliding with another.

The randomness of such crashes is part of what makes them so hard to accept.

Anything that can be done to improve the odds for teen drivers as they gain experience is important. That's true whether it is the government lengthening the time period in which teen drivers cannot have more than one unrelated passenger or parents imposing strict rules of their own.

A study released the same week as these accidents found that there were more than a third fewer serious crashes in states with the toughest teen driving laws.

Illinois has three of the seven requirements studied by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. Pending legislation would increase that to five of seven, if it approved.

The only two Illinois would be missing is a minimum age of 16 for a learner's permit (Illinois sets the age at 15) and a minimum age of 16½ for the intermediate stage (Illinois starts at 16).

As this legislation is reviewed, lawmakers should look at their own children and remember the teens who have died.

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