

Wednesday, April 28, 2021

## Trooper Tracy plants seeds of thought on rural road safety during season

By Christopher Heimerman  
For Illinois Press Association

As a beekeeper, a long-time Illinois state trooper, and the face and voice of rural road safety, Tracy Lillard knows you catch more flies with honey.

With planting season underway, the overseer of the Illinois State Police's social media channels leverages the ISP's main Facebook page and its 263,000 followers, 33 other pages, seven Twitter accounts and three Instagram channels to drive home the importance of being mindful of massive, slow-moving farm vehicles.

The threat of a ticket, or the horrifying proposition of a deadly crash, can stop people in their tracks. But it's her authentic, upbeat, slice-of-life posts that go viral.

"The public wants those feel-good stories," said Lillard, better known as "Trooper Tracy." "We can talk all day long about what drivers are doing wrong, but when we humanize rural road safety, it sticks with people."

For instance, she'll write and post "Dear so-and-so" letters to farmers and drivers, thanking them, while illustrating the importance of other drivers allowing them to safely plant and harvest the crops that fuel our daily life.

Lillard is constantly patrolling for educational opportunities. She recently shared a picture of a semi-trailer on the shoulder of a highway, with its lights flashing and a sprayer nearby. She explained what was playing out, while also sharing snippets of their conversation, as it turned out both drivers were longtime friends of her family.

"Who's the guy in the tractor?" Lillard said. "Is it the neighbor? My dad? Is he a 12-year-old kid moving equipment? While these folks are working hard against the clock, people just see it as an inconvenience because they're late for work."

Let's pump the brakes so Rodney Knittel, the Illinois Farm Bureau's assistant director of transportation and infrastructure, can rattle off mistakes drivers make most often while navigating slow-moving vehicles that bear the red-trimmed orange triangle.

Of course, the most horrifying scenario is a head-on crash precipitated by a driver passing on the left. Knittel said drivers need to give plenty of space between their vehicle and the farm equipment before passing, and be 100 percent sure there's no oncoming traffic, and no upcoming intersections where other drivers could be turning into the passing lane.



because of, you know, the laws of physics. Knittel said whether it's because they're impatient or simply unaware the driver needs to veer out to make the turn, the tailing driver tries to pass on the right.

You'd think that reflective, Slow Moving Vehicle emblem would be universally recognized, but as Knittel pointed out, even before the pandemic, there began a trend of urban flight. And with it becoming more widely accepted for employees to work from home, many lifelong urban residents are moving to the country.

"I think people want a little piece of country and quietness, and that's probably as heightened now as ever," Knittel said. "Growing up, most people knew what an SMV sign meant, but now that you have urban coming to country, there might not be that awareness."

He said rural residents

"I know people have to get somewhere, but it's for a short couple of months of the year," he said.

And if they think they're in a hurry, consider the farmer.

"They only have so much time to get crops in the ground," Knittel said. "They're rushing, trying to get it done, and getting the crop in is the most important part of the year, and the most stressful."

He's seen rear-end crashes. He's seen drivers pass on the right. Some of the collisions he's witnessed are seared into his memory.

"You see those types of things, and they're a lasting image you'll never forget," he said. "You don't want your family to be involved in that."

Lillard concedes that the scared-straight approach to education is effective. She spent 12 years on patrol writing tickets and hopes those memories stuck with folks.

"If we can write those tickets, we write them," she said. "And hopefully they'll remember it for the rest of their lives."

For Lillard, this stuff hits home – as in her current home in southern rural Champaign, near the ground her brother and cousin still farm. As a youth, she spent about 14 years detasseling corn on her family farm, and her father drove truck in-season and school buses in the off-season.

"I see all of those concerns with people behind semis, so I get frustrated," she said. "I've also seen how we can use education, rather than waiting for the crash to happen."



He said it's also common for drivers to rear-end machinery that's traveling around 15 mph. And while such a crash is bad for the farmer, you can imagine who most often gets the worst end of that exchange.

"Obviously, distracted driving is always an issue," Knittel said. "If you look down at a text message and look back up, your reaction time is all of a sudden drastically shortened. When I was a kid, we had a bag phone, so you didn't have to worry

about a text message or a Snapchat, or all these things we think are so important."

Knittel said another troublingly common scenario is one in which a farm implement driver has to veer left into the passing lane in order to execute a right-hand turn

not only need to be more educated, aware and focused while driving, but that they also need to budget more time to get where they're going, particularly during planting season in the spring and harvest season in the fall.

## Douglas County Search and Rescue Team exemplifies skill with recent aid

By Doris Elmore

Many times, Douglas County residents are unaware of just how fortunate they are with the different organizations and teams we have at our disposal. The Douglas County Search and Rescue Team is one of these groups. This team of individuals is not only available for our county, but to other

areas as well when needed. Chana Ray, Douglas County EMA Director, graciously provided information on the team and one of their recent calls. On Saturday, March 20, nine different search and rescue teams answered a call regarding a man in Pana who had been missing for over a year. The Illinois State

Police had new information and wanted to bring in trained searchers to help aid in finding evidence. The Douglas County Search and Rescue Team answered the call and were successful in their efforts. They were part of a multi-agency search. The team would like to thank Christ-Mont County agencies for the food and

communications. The Douglas County Search and Rescue Team is composed of hard-working individuals who volunteer their time for in-depth training so when needed, they are ready to help in a minute's notice. To enlighten the public on some points of the team: They do all kinds of searches such as

recovery, evidence, urban and wilderness. The team runs a Project Lifesaver program which has been in existence since 2012. This is a radio transmitter tracking program for those with Alzheimer's/dementia, autism, or a brain injury. Technologies such as SAR TOPO (CAL TOPO-smartphone app.) and Garmin

GPS Units are used to help them track their steps and mark clues, evidence, and waypoints. The team also does adaptive training.

In July, they are holding a 16-Hr. Ground Search and Rescue Class. For those interested that might be a good time to join their team.



Submitted Photo  
Douglas County Search and Rescue Team: Front Row, left to right: Brooke Ray, DCEMA Director Chana Ray, Tammy Bennett, Jim Hilgenberg, Coles County EMA Director. Hilgenberg is not with the Do. Co. team, but was there for the search. Back Row, left to right, Terri Condarco, Tito Condarco, Melea Fombelle, Tracy Anderson. Not pictured: Tammy Esposito, Macon County EMA Director. She was also on the Do. Co. team during the search.

**TUSCOLA**  
Ford  
WWW.FORDOFTUSCOLA.COM  
217-253-3353  
ON 36 IN TUSCOLA  
SMALL TOWN FEEL, GREAT BIG DEALS

**We will buy your vehicle!!**  
Dealer Inventory levels are extremely low!!  
Car, Truck, SUV, van, or just about anything else\*  
Bring it on down and we will make you a cash offer!!  
\*Anything that doesn't eat...