

FEATURED LETTER

A holiday plan: If you drink, don't drive

Today I am thankful for designated drivers.

Thirty days of thanks is an uplifting idea in which we share the many things we are thankful for, often on Facebook or other social media, leading up to the Thanksgiving holiday at the end of the month. I'd like to express my thanks and gratitude for one person who plays an important role in the community, especially during the Thanksgiving season — the designated driver.

In my work at EmPoWER Somerset, a nonprofit organization that assists individuals and families in making positive lifestyle choices and fosters healthy, drug-free communities through education, collaboration and linkages to resources, I was surprised to learn that Thanksgiving eve (not New Year's Eve, as I had originally guessed) is the holiday associated with the highest rates of drinking and driving.

With the arrival of the holidays, of course we are looking forward to a diversion from day-to-day stresses, and it is not a surprise that alcohol is often involved. In planning your night out, however, please don't overlook one important detail in the excitement of the celebration: What is your plan for getting home *safely*? If the answer is "I will be fine after only a few drinks," "I've gotten home safely many times before," or "I'll figure that out later," please think again.

A designated driver is a person who does not drink for the evening — not the least intoxicated person in your party. If you have managed to drive home safely after a few drinks in the past, that was luck — *not* a good predictor of future success.

The first three things to be impaired by drinking are your balance, coordination and judgment. Yes, even your judgment about how off-balance and uncoordinated you are. Make the decision not to drive *before* your judgment is clouded by alcohol. If the worst-case scenario car crash never happens, there are plenty of other reasons not to risk it such as surcharges, loss of driver's license, classes (that you will have to pay for) and the embarrassment over having your name in print.

How would you handle the unexpected costs and inconvenience of not driving and the disappointment of family and friends? Think about these things — they can all be avoided.

Ride Home 2Nite and the HERO Campaign are two resources to help you plan ahead by locating a taxi ride home or through friends by pledging to be the designated driver — not drinking any alcohol for the evening. Both campaigns emphasize exercising good judgment before it is impaired by alcohol. For more information, visit empowersomerset.com and click on the program icons or call us at 908-722-4900.

Who else knows that Thanksgiving eve has the highest rate of drunk driving? The cops, of course. They will be out that night too. We hope you will be a HERO or Ride Home 2Nite in a taxi, not a patrol car. Be thankful for the opportunity to think with a clear mind and plan ahead to drink responsibly. Be thankful for the designated driver in your group who is making sure that you are not endangering others on the road, including your own passengers, and that you get home safely.

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The Safe Communities Coalition of Somerset County works to foster a safe and healthy community by reducing drug use, underage drinking and prescription drug abuse. For more information, visit www.safecoalition.org.