

## THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

A well-known adage holds that only two things are certain - death and taxes. For the sake of this month's *Lowdown*, I am adding a third item to that list – vehicle crashes. Almost everyone I know has been in at least one accident as the at-fault driver, a passenger, or the motorist who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Wrecks can be deadly or painful, they are usually expensive, and they are always inconvenient and stressful. In the immediate aftermath, people generally struggle to remember exactly what they should do.

Let's start at the very beginning. People have a responsibility to themselves and to other motorists to maintain their vehicles properly. Bald tires, inoperable turn signals, worn out brakes, broken taillights, and crumbling wiper blades can all lead to a person causing or being unable to avoid a crash. North Carolina requires a yearly safety inspection to help identify these issues, and a person may not renew a license plate without proof that this assessment is complete, and any problems addressed. Law enforcement officers stop driver for expired tags because an out-of-date sticker signals that a qualified technician has not inspected the vehicle or that the vehicle failed the inspection, and the operator has not corrected the identified problems. Frankly, many people would not maintain their vehicle unless required to do so.

Prior to getting behind the wheel, it is generally a good idea for drivers to let someone know where they are going and when they plan to arrive. Ideally, motorists carry safety equipment, including a flashlight, first aid kit, and blankets. Many people think they don't need a jacket because they are taking a quick trip to run a short errand. They feel differently once they've waited an hour or more in the cold for a trooper and a tow truck!

I mention troopers because in the unincorporated parts of the county, the Highway Patrol investigates traffic crashes on state-maintained roads and in public vehicular areas. My deputies will respond to assist, render aid, or direct traffic, but troopers conduct the crash investigation and write any required reports. The wait times are often long, especially during rain or snow events when multiple collisions typically occur. Although such delays are frustrating, leaving the scene of a crash is against the law. Drivers must report any crash in which someone is injured or killed or property damage of at least \$1,000.00 occurs.

If no one seems injured and the property damage appears minimal, one of the parties may suggest handling the matter privately, but I advise against taking this course of

action! Vehicles may have hidden damage, people may not realize they are injured, and the other party may provide false information or fail to live up to any roadside agreements.

People involved in a collision should do their best to stay calm and proceed carefully. Each driver should assess him or herself and all passengers for injuries, turn on hazard lights, and check to see if it is safe to exit the vehicle. He or she should also heed warnings from witnesses or bystanders – they may see a hazard from their vantage point that the drivers cannot, such as downed power lines, fluid leaks, or oncoming traffic. Witnesses may realize an involved party is seriously hurt, but because of adrenalin or shock, the injured person may not feel pain yet.

Once out of the car, all parties should check on others involved in the crash, help uninjured people navigate away from the scene, call for help, and try to alert other motorists. Crash scenes are dangerous places - many wrecks are followed by additional collisions, either in a chain reaction, or because other drivers fail to successfully navigate around the scene of the crash.

North Carolina has a fender bender law which requires motorists to move vehicles to the side of the road and out of the path of nearby traffic if it is safe to do so and no one is seriously injured. Although drivers should comply with this law as soon as they can, taking a cell phone photo of the crash before moving the vehicles may be advisable.

I encourage everyone to remind themselves frequently that driving is a privilege and a tremendous responsibility. Approach the task with respect and caution and do not operate a vehicle under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Follow applicable laws, avoid distractions, use common sense, and be courteous. I wish everyone safe travels and a healthy 2024.