

YOLO Walk Safe Program Promotes Pedestrian Safety Among High School Students

by Andrew Metzger

The Montgomery County (MD) Department of Transportation YOLO Walk Safe program represents the culmination of four years of focused efforts to develop pedestrian safety awareness among high school students in Montgomery County. YOLO stands for “you only live once.” It is a program developed by students for students to help combat “distracted walking” caused by activities such as texting, playing handheld games, listening to music, or talking on the phone.

“We began working with one high school that was located in one of our high incidence areas in 2010,” said Nadji Kirby, Safe Routes to School Coordinator for the Montgomery County Department of Transportation. “We worked with the school administration to establish a pedestrian safety working group that included students, and we worked with those students to develop pedestrian safety awareness activities. Due to this success, we knew that some of the same strategies we used at this school could be used at other high schools.”

The YOLO toolkit, which is available [here](#), contains:

- A guidebook on developing and implementing a school pedestrian safety education program
- Ideas for events/education campaigns that could be conducted by a partnership of students, parents and PTAs
- A USB drive with digital resources, including web banners, electronic poster files, and a video public service announcement titled “Moment of Silence”
- Campaign posters
- Static clings for restroom mirrors
- Sample morning announcements
- Pledge banners
- A customizable letter/email for parents in English and Spanish
- A parent tip sheet in English and Spanish
- A social media plan, including graphics and pre-written tweets and posts
- Talking points for meetings or assemblies

Sadly, it was in the midst of efforts to broaden the program that a Montgomery County high school student, Christina Morris Ward, was fatally struck while walking to school.

“At that point, our County Council felt this was a priority, so they wanted us to develop a specific high school pedestrian safety program,” Kirby said. “We started with the ‘Walk Your Way’ project in late October 2013. This project gave grants of up to \$2,000 to any high school group that wanted to create, design, and implement their own pedestrian safety campaign. This generated the second part of the program, which is the YOLO toolkit. The toolkit was created to basically serve as an inspiration, motivator and idea generator for even more schools and student groups to get involved in developing their own pedestrian safety programs at their respective schools.”



“Currently, only public schools are included in the receipt of a toolkit,” Kirby said. “However, the great thing about our website is that anyone can access and utilize the posters, tweets, announcements, guidebook, etc. as they see fit for their school. I am hopeful that some private schools will utilize the resources; and if they need help thinking through ideas on doing activities or starting a pedestrian safety working group, we will be more than happy to help them do that.”

Kirby cited statistics which show that one in five high school students cross the street while engaging in distracted behavior. “In Montgomery County, for pedestrians at fault between 10 and 29 years of age, the age range found most at fault was 15 to 19, so this data supported our outreach efforts aimed at this age group,” she said.

In addition to making the YOLO toolkits available, the Montgomery County Department of Transportation also conducts pedestrian safety assemblies that include the County Police as well as Gwen Ward, the mother of Christina Morris Ward.

“We will work one-on-one with high schools to help them plan and implement various pieces of the overall program,” Kirby said. “That may take the form of an assembly or a presentation for specific groups of high school students. Each school varies. We just hope that each school will do something to help make their staff and students really understand the dangers of the road and what they can do to help keep themselves safe.”

Patrick Willi, Product Development Manager for School Training Solutions, a division of Smart Horizons, learned about the YOLO Walk Safe program at the 2014 National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services (NASDPTS) Annual Conference, held November 9-12 in Kansas City, MO.

“I was extremely impressed with the YOLO Walk Safe campaign,” Willi said. “It is a well crafted, simple message that I was able to immediately identify. I think it is a message that should be taught across the country, especially as texting and smart phones continue to grow in accessibility and popularity.”

