

Sheriff's Office hopes classes will save young lives on roads

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Spartanburg County Sheriff Chuck Wright talks about the Alive @ 25 driver-education program that will be offered for young drivers at a news conference Tuesday morning.

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There have been 37 fatal auto accidents in [Spartanburg](#) County so far this year, and 14 of those involved drivers younger than 25.

The [Spartanburg](#) County Sheriff's Office is introducing a program to teach defensive driving skills so these statistics can be lowered. The program, called Alive @ 25, is geared toward drivers between the ages of 15 and 24 - a group often involved in fatal collisions.

"We've got to do what we have to do to educate our children," [Spartanburg](#) County Sheriff Chuck Wright said at a news conference Tuesday morning. "Drunk driving is not the only thing killing us."

Alive @ 25 teaches young drivers that people in their age group are more likely to be hurt or killed in a vehicle crash and that inexperience, distractions and peer pressure cause unique driving hazards. It also tells them that speeding, alcohol, and drugs increase their risk of injury or death.

Brooke Russell, executive director of the [South Carolina](#) chapter of the National Safety Council, said there are about 25 states that have a similar program. Colorado was one of the first states to begin the program 13 years ago, and it has proved successful, Russell said.

The Alive @ 25 program kicked off in Midlands schools earlier this spring, and a few schools including Dutch Fork, Chapin and Irmo high schools have required students to complete the program in order to obtain a campus parking permit.

"We absolutely appreciate the support of Sheriff Wright and his staff, as they're the first law enforcement agency in the Upstate to look at this from a proactive stance, rather than a reactive one," Russell said.

The four-hour program will be offered at 4 p.m. on Aug. 1, 15, and 29 and at 9 a.m. on Aug. 25. Sheriff's deputies who work in the traffic unit will teach the courses at the sheriff's office, at 8045 Howard St.

Registration forms for the free course can be picked up at the sheriff's office or via the National Safety Council's Web site.

Wright said there will be a voluntary tracking method implemented in local high schools to determine whether offering the course reduces vehicle crashes.

"Other people who have used this have reduced the number of accidents at schools," Wright said.

A few educators and school resource officers from several [Spartanburg](#) school districts were in attendance Tuesday morning for the program announcement.

[Spartanburg](#) High principal Rodney Graves said it will be beneficial to students, as three District 7 students have lost their lives to auto accidents in the last year and a half. He said he'll talk with school leaders this year about implementing mandatory participation in the Alive @ 25 program in order to receive a parking permit for the 2008-09 year.

"Teenagers sometimes think they're invincible, and this will help students realize the dangers of driving a car," said Graves, whose oldest son will begin driving to school this year. "We don't have many accidents on campus, and I think the presence of the two sheriff's deputies directing traffic helps student leave more orderly."

There are 30 open slots per course, and after the free courses fill up, the Sheriff's Office will offer the program for \$30 per person. Wright even suggests drivers who complete the course take their certificate to their insurance company, to ask if rates can be lowered.

"If we save one child's life," Wright said, "then every bit of this is worth it."