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Irresponsible drivers cause accidents: chief

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Although York Regional Police Chief Julian Fantino made traffic safety a top priority when he joined the force, fatalities have jumped 24 per cent since then.

Last year, 41 people lost their lives, eight more than in 1998.

Fantino, who joined York's force in June 1998 and leaves to become Toronto's chief in April, declared a renewed assault on dangerous driving at a news conference Tuesday.

He said 85 per cent of serious and fatal collisions are preventable because they are caused by inappropriate driving or pedestrian conduct.

"In the hands of an irresponsible person, a motor vehicle is no less dangerous than a loaded firearm," Fantino said.

"All of us can do a great deal to preserve life and safety and be a little more responsible, if you will, in this regard."

In 1999, 36.4 per cent of fatal accidents were caused by excessive speed, the single biggest contributor. Alcohol was a factor in 21.2 per cent.

Weather was responsible for only 9.1 per cent.

Fantino said the statistics clearly point out driver error is to blame for the vast majority of fatal accidents.

"Ironically, for all our stepped-up public safety efforts, including a 40-per-cent increase in traffic enforcement over 1998, the increased carnage and trauma during 1999 is very distressing indeed," he said.

"Moreover, experience indicates that people don't seem to get it, including drinking and driving."

Fatal accidents not only devastate family and

friends, they affect police officers.

"There is a reasonable expectation, as we travel our highways and byways, that we will get home to our loved ones."

"Were (police officers) just absolutely devastated to have to knock on doors again and again and notify loved ones that a family member was killed in a traffic collision."

"I, myself, have attended some of these and have been traumatized."

Although the force has beefed up policing for traffic offences, Fantino said officers will be even more vigilant.

But at the same time, he challenged drivers and pedestrians to take more responsibility.

"I am holding the public accountable for doing something about this," he said. "Stop this nonsense because it's all preventable."

While Fantino agreed York's growth and overburdened roads are a factor in some collisions, he said blaming road rage is a lame excuse.

"I don't believe in this road rage thing. It's a cop-out. At the end of the day, it's up to intelligent, law-abiding people to adjust to these issues," he said.

"It's a sexy name. People can call it road rage all they want. I call it irresponsible. At the end of the day, we're talking about people's lives."

Residents and police have been conditioned to view traffic collisions as accidents. But Fantino argued most are preventable.

"There is no supreme right to speed and go through red lights. One has to wonder, as I do, what is happening to our respect for each other and for the rules of the road?" he said.

"We seem to have developed a certain amount of complacency on this issue. This kind of lawlessness promotes anarchy."

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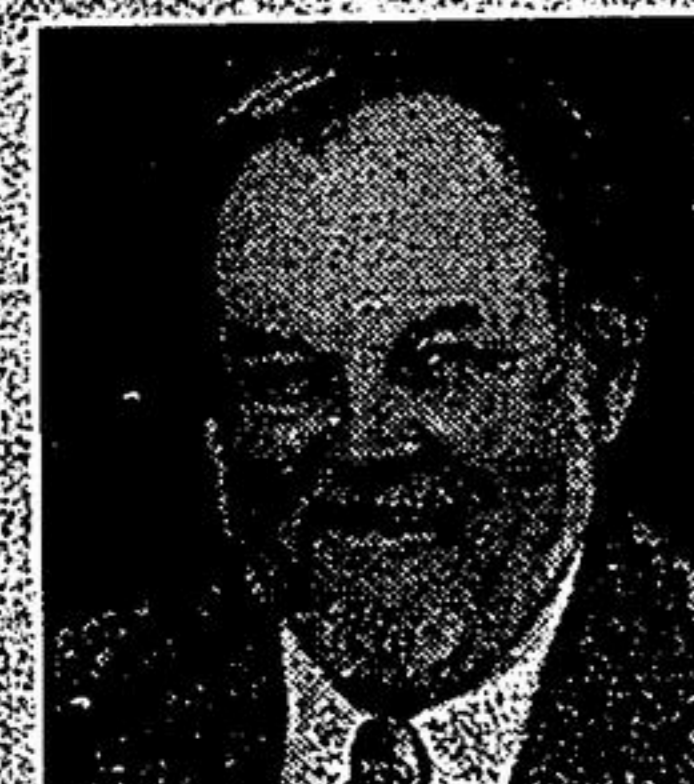
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