



95° FORECAST TRAFFIC

# Texas Transportation Department brings distracted-driving simulator to Dallas-Fort Worth

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As Gary Sisto hopped in a pickup for a drive, he got an unusual order from the Texas Department of Transportation safety specialist riding along: Take out your phone and start texting.

"Aw, shoot," Sisto said, fumbling around with his iPhone.

"It's difficult, right?" said Robert White, the TxDOT official.

"Wow, I'm off the road," Sisto said in a panicked voice, before overcorrecting and smashing into another vehicle.

Fortunately for all involved, the "crash" was a virtual one. The "road" where Sisto's texting made him a danger to himself and others existed only on a TV screen in front of him.

His test drive was part of a simulation that TxDOT's Dallas district is using to teach the dangers of distracted driving.

For several months, TxDOT has been bringing the high-tech simulator to schools, festivals and company events across North Texas. The idea is to give drivers a safe way to experience the hazards of texting and other distractions behind the wheel.

"It really makes you wake up and smell the coffee," said Sisto. An employee of Denbury Resources, an independent oil and gas company headquartered in Plano, he joined dozens of co-workers in trying out the simulator last month.

More than 90,000 Texas crashes last year were caused by "distracted driving," a description that encompasses everything from cellphone usage to simple inattention, TxDOT officials said. Those wrecks resulted in more than 18,000 serious injuries and about 450 deaths.

In Texas, drivers under 18 are prohibited from using cellphones in the first 12 months after they get their licenses. For all drivers, only hands-free cellphones may be used in school zones. And a few cities, including Arlington, have banned texting while driving in their city limits.

But despite a growing awareness of the dangers of texting behind the wheel, a bill to outlaw the practice statewide fizzled in the Texas Legislature this year. Such a bill was passed in 2011, only to be vetoed by Gov. Rick Perry, who decried the measure as "a government effort to micromanage the behavior of adults."

Even those who preach that distracted driving is dangerous admit that they're not always perfect.

"If we all are honest, we have all messed with the phone, picked it up, done something," said White, a former state trooper.

Distracted-driving simulators have been around for years. But TxDOT's version is a bit different in that it involves an actual vehicle, a pickup with a small TV screen mounted on the dashboard above the steering wheel, facing the driver. Participants have the option of looking at that TV screen or putting on special glasses that make the simulation more immersive.

The Dallas office is the only one of TxDOT's 25 district offices to have the teaching tool.

TxDOT teamed up on the project with Dallas-based AT&T, which paid \$20,000 to create the video game-like simulator. Officials hope to take the simulator to as many locales as time and resources permit.

"We direct a lot of our efforts toward students," said David Arbuckle, an AT&T vice president of external affairs. "But we are also working with TxDOT to do outreach to more than just students."

That includes appearances at events like Denbury Resources' annual health fair.

Whitney Shelley, Denbury's chief human resources officer, said some employees brought their kids to try out the simulator. With two teenagers of her own, Shelley took a spin behind the wheel so she could report back home about the dangers of texting while driving.

She hopped in the truck, which sits on coasters that allow the wheels to turn without moving the vehicle.

As others watched her performance on another TV screen, Shelley negotiated a veritable commuting Armageddon.

"Oh my God," she shouted after wrecking, like many of her co-workers.

The truck "drove" like it had lost its power steering. White and another safety specialist chatted nonstop in an effort to break Shelley's concentration. On the screen, animals and people jumped out into traffic. Drivers stopped randomly.

At one point, an ambulance drove in reverse at what seemed like 30 mph.

White acknowledged that the gauntlet was excessive. But the point, he said, was to reinforce the idea that many things can be a distraction and that the worst-case scenario could pop up at any moment.

"You probably won't run into that many hazards in a regular drive," he said with a sly grin. "But you can."

Follow Tom Benning on Twitter at [@tombenning](#).

## The risks

In 2011, 3,331 Americans were killed and 387,000 were injured in crashes involving a distracted driver.

Ten percent of injury crashes in 2011 involved a distracted driver.

At any given moment during the day, 660,000 U.S. drivers are using cellphones or other electronic devices.

One in 4 teens acknowledges sending at least one text each time he or she drives.

Sending or reading a text takes a driver's eyes from the road for an average of 4.6 seconds. At 55 mph, that's the equivalent of driving the length of a football field — blind.

SOURCE: [www.distraction.gov](http://www.distraction.gov), a website of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

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