



Nancy Johnson is a volunteer legislative liaison for Minnesotans for Safe Driving. Between 1988 and 1998, she won the national MADD Golden Achievement Award and the Kosiak Volunteer Advocate award from the state Department of Public Safety. She also served on the state and national MADD boards of directors and on the state DWI Task Force, and she was a member and chair of the Minnesota Reparations Board. (Photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

## Safe-driving group wants more specific language in law

By: Nancy Crotti    March 12, 2014    0

When the prison term for Amy Senser's hit-and-run conviction was reduced last week, it underlined the single goal Minnesotans for Safe Driving has for the upcoming legislative session: change the state hit-and-run law.

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The all-volunteer, nonprofit group wants to substitute the word "accident," sprinkled throughout the statute, with the word "collision."

Why? "Accident" implies that the driver has no control over his or her actions, according to Nancy Johnson, volunteer lobbyist for the organization, whereas "collision" is more neutral.

The group also wants to insert the following sentence into the statute: "When the collision involves a person or another vehicle, mistake as to what was struck is not a defense for failure to stop and investigate."

That change would make it the driver's responsibility to know whether he or she hit a person, property or another vehicle, rather than placing the burden of proof on the prosecutor. The existing statute does not require a driver to stop unless he or she knew at the time that they hit a person or vehicle.

Johnson said the Senser case highlighted the shortcomings of the law. Senser was convicted of criminal vehicular homicide in the hit-and-run crash that resulted in the death of 38-year-old Anousone Phanthavong of Roseville in 2011. Senser claimed she thought she had hit a construction cone or barrel and left the scene without checking.

DFL Sen. Kevin Dahle of Northfield introduced the amended hit-and-run legislation (SF 1246) last spring, but said it got stuck in the judiciary committee, which had many other matters to consider. Rep. Paul Rosenthal of Edina introduced it in the House as HF 1335.

"The bill's still alive and we think that the legislation is pretty sensible and not too controversial," Dahle says.

Dahle was concerned that Minnesota's trial lawyers might object. Not to worry, according to Joel Carlson, senior lobbyist for the Minnesota Association for Justice.

"We think that this is an effort to promote accountability for drivers and we applaud the efforts of the Minnesota Association for Safe Driving in pushing this issue forward," Carlson says. "We would be happy to work with them as the issue moves through the Legislature."

### **Looking out for victims**

Minnesotans for Safe Driving also wants the Legislature to change the careless-driving statute to impose harsher penalties on drivers found guilty of killing others by speeding or by aggressive and inattentive driving. A bill to do so passed the House in 2012, but did not make it through the Senate, Johnson said. The group is considering making the language more specific and having it reintroduced in 2015, given this year's short session.

"We've been trying to increase the penalty at least to a gross misdemeanor. If somebody kills somebody in a drunk-driving crash, it's a drunk-driving felony," Johnson says. "Jail time is very unusual for any kind of non-alcohol-related

crash, unless it's very high-profile."

In addition to its work at the Capitol, Minnesotans for Safe Driving offers victim-rights packets, help for those who are grieving the death of loved ones who die as a result of collisions, connections to other resources, and death notification sensitivity training to police, emergency medical technicians, coroners, clergy and others charged with this duty.

Nancy Johnson and her husband, Dennis, know what it's like to receive that notification. The couple's teenage daughter, Tina, was killed by a drunk driver in a head-on collision in 1984. Dennis Johnson took over as volunteer state chair of Mothers Against Drunk Driving from 1985 to 1991 and did a lot of lobbying, even though his wife said it was "never his thing."

"Trauma changes people in many ways, and it was something he needed to do, to do something about her death," Nancy Johnson says.

She joined her husband in volunteering for MADD, and went on to join Minnesotans for Safe Driving after it was founded in 2000. The group's founder, Jon Cummings, lost a son to a drunk driver in 1994, and founded the newer group based on the incidence of collisions stemming from reasons other than drunk driving.

Nancy and Dennis Johnson did their volunteer work while raising hogs on their Lonsdale farm. They added bison several years ago and in 2006, transitioned to raising bison exclusively with the help of a son-in-law. Dennis Johnson has stepped back from volunteering.

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She has served as president of Minnesotans for Safe Driving and has been on several state traffic safety task forces. Gov. Mark Dayton recently appointed her as a public member of the Peace Officer Standards and Training board.

Johnson is also a trained victim advocate, speaker, organizer and trainer, and is responsible for the Minnesotans for Safe Driving website.

At age 70, she wouldn't mind turning some volunteer duties over to others, but she has no plans to do so.

"There are people very interested, but they have jobs, they have children," she says. "All of us are seniors and we are able to do stuff that most people coming along the line don't have the time to do."

Dahle says he admires Johnson's commitment and sincerity

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"I enjoy working with Nancy a lot. She's persistent. She won't let you forget about a bill," he says. "She's very professional and it makes you actually want to work harder for her because of her tenacity."

Kelly Moller has worked with Johnson on the hit-and-run bill since she became executive director of the Minnesota Alliance on Crime in 2012. Moller said she was new to lobbying at the time.

"She has been a tremendous resource for us with the hit-and-run legislation, not only to just support the bill but [on] who to talk to and when to talk to people," Moller says. "[She] has a really good sense of the process. I don't know that I could have done all of this without her help."

Lobbying for traffic safety is not an easy job, according to Johnson.

"It's harder for us to find legislators who are really on board with traffic issues ... even though that's where they're most likely to get injured or killed," she says. "We all think it's not going to happen to us."

## THE JOHNSON FILE

**Name:** Nancy Johnson

**Job:** Volunteer legislative liaison for Minnesotans for Safe Driving

**Age:** 70

**Grew up:** Edina

**Lives in:** Lonsdale

**Education:** Edina High School

**Family:** Husband, Dennis; four daughters; three granddaughters; one great-granddaughter

**Hobbies:** Sewing, hand and machine embroidery, scrapbooking, volunteering

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