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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

NEW PROGRAM TO STRESS TRAFFIC SAFETY TO UNIVERSITY FACULTY, STAFF

CHARLESTON -- Bringing the message of traffic safety into Eastern Illinois University offices across campus will be the goal of the new Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS).

Eastern has been selected as one of four model sites in Illinois to establish a comprehensive NETS program within the university and has received a grant from the Illinois Department of Transportation, Division of Traffic Safety, to implement the program.

The NETS program will be administered through Eastern's Office of Safety Programs, which will be responsible for development, implementation and evaluation of the traffic safety program for university employees. These programs will be continued into the Charleston community with the university becoming a teacher of traffic safety within the community as a whole, according to Becky Markwell, acting director of Eastern's Safety Programs.

Markwell said the program offers guidelines for traffic safety in a new setting.

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"People spend most of their time at work, so this program brings the message of traffic safety into the offices and the workplace," Markwell said.

Eastern's NETS program is designed to reduce and prevent costs associated with traffic crashes. The goals of the program are to reduce loss of life, injury and property; lower health care costs; reduce workers' compensation costs; improve productivity; lower operating costs; reduce absenteeism; and improve employee morale.

The Office of Safety Programs will provide ongoing training, program material and information throughout the year to promote desirable safety behavior both on and off the job.

Members of NETS met at a luncheon in February to coordinate the program and discuss initiatives. Among the more than 30 EIU administrative and supervisory personnel in attendance were Gene Scholes, director of media services and member of the Charleston City Council; Ted Weidner, director of the Physical Plant; Gary Hanebrink, campus safety officer; Lynette Drake, director of Health Services; Eastern Police Chief Tom Larson; and Harriet Rose, assistant director of administrative services.

"We had a diverse group at the meeting and it went over very well," Markwell said. "Talking about something like seat belts or traffic safety can become a touchy issue, but everyone was very enthusiastic."

"What we're doing now is trying to put together some of the programs we would like to try," she said. "We sat down at the meeting and tried to pinpoint the

areas on campus whose workers are most associated with the road."

Among the ideas discussed at the luncheon were two programs related to wearing a seat belt when driving. As part of one program, individuals would be randomly surveyed in the campus parking lots. Those people who say they use their seat belt get a coupon for a free soft drink at a local fast food restaurant, Markwell said.

In the second program, the group would launch a survey to find out how many employees use their seat belt. If it is found that 70 percent of the workers wear seatbelts, the university would receive an award from the state.

Besides incentive programs, specialized educational training will be provided for university departments that require employees to drive as part of their job. A review will be made of all traffic safety policies and recommendations will be made where appropriate. Seasonal promotional materials will be used to implement special safety campaigns throughout the year, along with regular mailings to all employees, newspaper articles and incentive programs to reward safe driving practices.

"With the assistance and cooperation of the members of the campus community, Eastern has the potential to become a model for the state in employer-based traffic safety programming," Markwell said. "And, as the program expands into the community, Eastern will demonstrate its leadership in providing quality programming to improve the health and safety of the surrounding community."

In addition, the group also discussed traffic safety concerns on campus.

"The pedestrian problem on campus was the biggest focus," Markwell said. "We broke into groups at the meeting and everyone had pedestrian safety at the top of their list."

"Students, a lot of the time, don't use the crosswalks and people driving cars on Fourth and Seventh streets don't respect the crosswalks," she said.

Markwell added the group is considering education materials such as posters to try to raise awareness of the pedestrian problem. In addition, some information will be sent to the residence halls to try to educate students.

She said traffic crashes are the number one top cause of death nationally to Americans ages 1 to 34. Ninety-six percent of all crashes are caused by human error, usually due to poor choices in three major areas: alcohol use, not wearing a safety belt and speed.