

Sheriff's office lowers the boom on loud car stereos

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Article published on Monday, Jan. 23, 2012

It's a daily frustration, motorists stuck in traffic with a nearby car playing music so loud it rattles the dashboard.

For others, it's a nighttime problem as they are unable to sleep due to "audio terrorists" driving their neighborhood streets.

Loud music blasting from car stereos is a nuisance and it's illegal, says Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri, who is determined to do something about it.

Operation Lower the Boom is a new community program designed to create awareness with the ultimate goal of getting offenders to turn down the volume.

Launched by the sheriff's office on Jan. 13, in cooperation with Noise Free Florida, the program aims at getting the public's help with enforcing a county ordinance designed to keep the peace.

Plenty of noise complaints come in to the sheriff's office on a regular basis, said Sgt. Tom Nestor with the sheriff's public information office.

"This is such an issue, and we (the sheriff's office) saw there was a need," Nestor said.

The "need" the program fulfills is twofold. It makes it easier for the public to report nuisance vehicles and it gives law enforcement more ears on the streets to help find noisy offenders.

Residents can now document noise problems using a form on the sheriff's website, www.pcsoweb.com/operations/programs-and-services/operation-lower-the-boom. Complete the form, hit the submit button and deputies will take the next steps.

Residents need to know the vehicle's Florida tag number, vehicle color, street or intersection where the incident occurred and be able to give a description of the incident. They can include other information, such as vehicle make and model or information about the driver, if they desire.

People without internet access can call the sheriff's nonemergency number, 582-6200, and a dispatcher will take the information and pass it on to deputies.

Deputies will run the vehicle's tag given in the report and, if everything checks out, the owner will be sent a warning letter informing them of the county's ordinance and the potential for fines. The next time the same person is reported, a community policing officer will be sent to their home to talk to them.

Nestor said the sheriff is committed to getting the message out to people with excessively loud car stereos to turn it down; however, that doesn't mean the sheriff's office is making its other duties less of a priority.

Operation Lower the Boom is just one of many programs in which the sheriff's office is involved, Nestor said. It isn't replacing deputies' current duties.

"We've not stopped responding to law enforcement calls," he said. "We're not shutting down the narcotics squad or robbery-homicide. We'll still be looking for the bad guys."



Photo courtesy PCSO

The Pinellas County Sheriff's Office and its partner Noise Free Florida is lowering the boom on excessively loud car stereos.

But, with the public's help, deputies will be more aggressively tackling the problem of excessive noise.

That's good news for Judy Ellis and Heidi Sumner, members of Noise Free Florida, who worked with Sheriff Gualtieri to start the Lower the Boom program.

Ellis, who labels drivers of so-called boom cars as "audio terrorists," offered a number of statistics showing how motorists with excessively loud car stereos are a threat to others.

For example, according to Ellis, one in four cars stopped by law enforcement for an excessively loud stereo has drugs or guns in the vehicle, or they're wanted on warrants.

"Criminals are criminals," she said. "These are the same people who run red lights. They have criminal behavior problems."

Boom cars also can be attributed to the alarming rate of hearing loss among America's youth. In 2006, 15 to 17 percent of U.S. children in middle school had a hearing impairment. Today, that number has grown to 17 to 20 percent.

"And it only gets worse as they go on to high school," Ellis said. "What are we going to do? Segregate kids by who can hear and who can't?"

She talked about latest medical findings about babies and young children who are strapped into carriers located in the back seat of vehicles with loud stereos. The noise and vibrations are affecting their brains, she said.

People driving around with loud stereos make it more dangerous for emergency workers to do their jobs.

"They (motorists) can't hear the sirens," she said.

She told a story about a 16 year old in Colorado who pulled into the path of an ambulance. She didn't hear the sirens. She died in the crash. The emergency medical technicians and the patient were severely injured. Ellis blames an excessive sound level for the tragedy.

Loud noise also is unhealthy, Ellis said.

"From a pure health standpoint, about 10 percent of Americans suffer from illness caused by high decibels (loud sounds) and vibrations," she said. For many the noise makes them feel angry. They want to hurt someone. And 10 percent get physically sick. It's a toxic combination."

She talked about how the body processes loud noises.

"First, they think 'how can I hurt somebody'," she said. "Second, they become nauseated. They sweat and feel terrible. The noise causes accelerated heart rate and a rise in blood pressure. People become uncharacteristically violent."

She said it is frustrating that people who have the loud stereos believe they have an entitlement.

"But, your right to make noise stops at my ear drums," she said.

The state of Florida has no valid noise law. The previous law was challenged in court and was found to be unconstitutional. However, most municipalities and counties do have ordinances that law enforcement can use, if they choose to do so.

Gualtieri chose to begin a program to step up enforcement of a county ordinance that Ellis said would stand up in court. The ordinance says no person shall make, continue, permit or cause to be made or continued:

1. Any unreasonably loud and raucous noise
2. Any noise which unreasonably disturbs, injures, or endangers the comfort, repose, health, peace, or safety of reasonable persons of ordinary sensitivity
3. Any noise that exceeds the maximum allowable limits set by ordinance

Factors to be considered in determining whether a violation of the law exists include:

1. The volume of the noise
2. The intensity of the noise
3. The volume and intensity of the background noise, if any
4. The nature and zoning of the area from which the sound emanates and the area where it is received or perceived
5. The duration of the noise
6. The time of the day or night the noise occurs
7. Whether the noise is recurrent, intermittent or constant
8. Whether a noise complaint has been received by the county

If deputies can prove a violation of the ordinance, civil penalties will be imposed. The first fine is \$218, the second offense \$418 and the third offense \$500.

Noise Free Florida has about 40 members scattered through Pinellas County, Ellis said. All are committed to working toward creating a peaceful, quieter atmosphere for residents to enjoy. They want to put a stop to the “rolling PA systems” that travel the highways and residential areas.

She said there has been some talk on the federal level of banning some of the equipment installed in vehicles that some label as “auditory weapons.”

Meanwhile, Ellis and other members of Noise Free Florida are pleased with the work Gualtieri has started with Operation Lower the Boom.

“The beauty of it is that it only takes a 44 cent stamp. It’s not labor intensive. It’s easy for the deputies to run tags. It doesn’t take a lot of research or a lot of staff time. And, if it becomes widely known and used, we will see a change in the number of incidents,” she said.

Ellis praised “Sheriff G’s” response to Noise Free Florida’s request for help. She said he gave them everything they asked for including assigning a “noise guru” to take charge of the program. That “guru” is Lt. Joe Garret, who was on the job and responding to complaints the day after the program was announced, she said.

Some municipalities have programs aimed at loud car stereos, including Clearwater and Largo, but Operation Lower the Boom is countywide, which makes Ellis very happy.

“No matter where you are in the county, you can call the sheriff for help,” she said.

The group’s short-term goal for the new program is to cut down the noise in some areas so “people can get a good night’s sleep,” she said as she described Sumner’s efforts to block the noise coming into her house attributed to vehicles with excessively loud stereos.