

MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY MINNESOTA STATE PATROL

State Patrol Awards Ceremony Feb. 8, 2024

Meritorious Citizenship Award: This award is presented to individuals other than State Patrol employees who have assisted the Minnesota State Patrol in providing a significant service to the public.

Jeremy Gerard and Jordan Larson

Feb. 4 – Trooper Alex Vukelich was attempting to arrest a suspect on a traffic stop when a physical struggle ensued. At one point, Trooper Vukelich was knocked to the ground with the suspect on top of him. Jeremy Gerard and Jordan Larson were driving by and heard Trooper Vukelich yelling for help. They stopped and helped gain control of the suspect. Jeremy and Jordan put their own safety aside to help Trooper Vukelich in what was potentially a life-threatening situation.

Benjamin Berg

July 21 – Ben Berg witnessed a personal injury crash and immediately notified 911. The at-fault driver ran from the scene, and Ben ran after him. While maintaining a safe distance, Ben relayed the suspect's description and location to dispatch. With this information, troopers were able to take the suspect into custody without incident. Due to Ben's quick thinking, the suspect was ultimately charged and held accountable for his actions.

Jerome Greene

Sept. 1 – A speed violator fled from a traffic stop, crashed into a ditch and fled on foot. Troopers located the suspect hiding under a semi-trailer at a local business. When they attempted to take him into custody, he physically resisted and ran again. Jerome Greene was working at the business and saw what was happening. He ran after the suspect, who was believed to be impaired, and detained him until law enforcement arrived. Jerome's actions were instrumental in holding the driver accountable for his actions.

Emily Kunkel

Dec. 6 – Emily Kunkel came upon the scene of a serious crash. Emily, who is a nurse, stopped and immediately offered assistance to troopers on scene and helped with CPR. After fire department personnel took over, Emily helped another victim with serious injuries and remained on scene until all of the victims were being cared for. By taking the initiative at a very chaotic scene, Emily Kunkel contributed to the victims' chances of survival.



Minnesota State Patrol Commendation Award: This award is presented to members of another law enforcement or emergency service agency who have assisted the State Patrol in providing a significant service.

Deputy Chris Majeski (Washington County Sheriff's Office)

June 17 – Deputy Chris Majeski responded to reports of a wrong-way driver that had crashed head on with a semi on Interstate 94. When he arrived on scene, both vehicles were on fire and the driver of the semi was unconscious. Despite the fire, he entered the cab of the semi and pulled the driver to safety. Shortly thereafter, the cab became fully engulfed in flames. Without Deputy Majeski's intervention, the driver would not have survived.

Deputy Nate Hanson (Rice County Sheriff's Office)

July 12 – Deputy Nate Hanson responded to an injury crash near Faribault. A semi-truck was on fire and heavy smoke was coming from the cab. People at the scene were attempting to pull the driver out of the cab without success. Deputy Hanson used a fire extinguisher in the driver's compartment, then pulled the driver's arm until he was able to dislodge him. He proceeded to drag the driver away from the burning semi and began treatment for life-threatening injuries. Although the driver passed away from the severity of his injuries, Deputy Hanson's actions were commendable.

Life Saving Award: This award is presented to members of the State Patrol who distinguish themselves by performing acts that prevent the death of another.

Trooper Thomas Saunders (Marshall District)

This presentation is combined with a Minnesota State Patrol Commendation for Deputy Caleb Cihak of the Jackson County Sheriff's Office and a Meritorious Citizenship Award for Justin Warmka.

Dec. 27, 2022 – While helping with removal of a vehicle in the ditch, Trooper Thomas Saunders witnessed another vehicle roll over in front of him. Trooper Saunders and tow operator Justin Warmka removed five occupants from the overturned vehicle; one was not breathing. Trooper Saunders and Justin Warmka began CPR. Deputy Caleb Cihak arrived on scene and provided an AED. CPR was continued and the occupant began to breathe on his own.

Trooper Alex Molitor (Rochester District)

Jan. 15 – Trooper Alex Molitor had stopped at a restaurant when he noticed a man in the parking lot hunched over. He approached the man and noticed that he was having difficulty breathing and was choking. Trooper Molitor pounded on his back to clear the obstruction. When that didn't work, he applied abdominal thrusts which dislodged the obstruction.

Sergeant Patrick Fay (Commercial Vehicle Section)

Jan. 27 – Sergeant Patrick Fay was dining at a restaurant with family and friends when a female guest at his table began choking. She signaled that she was fine, but Sergeant Fay detected a slight wheezing and determined she was unable to breathe. He immediately applied abdominal thrusts. The obstruction was dislodged and she resumed breathing.



Trooper Andrew Kutz (Mankato District)

Feb. 4 – Trooper Andrew Kutz was off duty celebrating his birthday with family and friends when he witnessed a man collapse. He realized the man had gone into cardiac arrest and had no pulse. Trooper Kutz initiated CPR, then applied multiple shocks using an AED. Prior to EMTs arrival, the man regained consciousness and was talking.

Sergeant Nicholas Hanson (West Metro District)

April 8 – Sergeant Nicholas Hanson responded to a call of a woman sitting on a bridge over Interstate 94 with her legs hanging over the freeway. He noted the woman was in distress and attempts to communicate with her were unsuccessful. He swiftly grabbed her from behind and pulled her off the ledge. Trooper Hanson was on the scene roughly 20 seconds before seizing the opportunity to pull her to safety and prevent a tragedy.

Trooper Darcy Gagnon (Brainerd District)

June 9 – Trooper Darcy Gagnon responded to the scene of a head-on crash. A woman was trapped inside her vehicle with the passenger compartment crushed around her. Trooper Gagnon determined the victim had sustained severe trauma to her left leg. She reached into the vehicle and applied a tourniquet to stop the heavy bleeding. This action no doubt saved the victim's life. At last report, the victim was recovering and on track to gain full use of her leg.

Trooper Mark Schafer (Brainerd District)

June 14 – Trooper Mark Schafer responded to a medical emergency. An 85-year-old man was unresponsive and not breathing. Relatives had been attempting to administer CPR. Trooper Schafer activated his AED; however, no shock was advised. He took over CPR and continued chest compressions for over five minutes. Additional first responders arrived on scene and eventually, a pulse was reestablished.

Troopers Derrick Row and Andres Guerra (West Metro District)

June 18 – Troopers Derrick Row and Andres Guerra responded to a rollover crash. Trooper Row observed an unconscious man sitting in the driver's seat and pulled him from the vehicle. After evaluation, he administered a dose of Narcan. The driver's pulse deteriorated from weak to undetectable. Trooper Guerra arrived on scene and retrieved his AED and began CPR, trading off with Trooper Row until care was transferred to medics. The man was transported to the hospital where he later regained a pulse.

Trooper Josh Hall (Rochester District)

July 1 – Trooper Josh Hall responded to the scene of a shooting at a local business. A victim had suffered gunshot wounds to the femoral area and upper chest/shoulder and was rapidly losing blood. Trooper Hall quickly secured a tourniquet around the victim's upper leg to slow the bleeding and provided direct care to the chest/shoulder wound until medics arrived on scene. Trooper Hall's actions significantly increased the victim's chance of survival.

Troopers Justin Mathes and Cleopatra Nystrom (West Metro District)

July 7 – Troopers Justin Mathes and Cleopatra Nystrom responded to an injury crash. Witnesses reported the driver was in and out of consciousness. Troopers Mathes removed the driver from the vehicle. With Trooper Nystrom's assistance, CPR and other life saving measures were administered. The driver regained consciousness and was transported by ambulance for further care.



Trooper Ryan Luczak (Marshall District)

Aug. 12 – Trooper Ryan Luczak responded to the scene of a motorcycle crash. He found the victim lying in the ditch and a man was administering CPR. Trooper Luczak could not detect a pulse and took over CPR. When medics arrived, Trooper Luczak assisted with rescue breathing. After care was transferred to medics, he secured a landing zone for air care. The victim was flown to the hospital.

Trooper Matt Schmitz (St. Cloud District)

Sept. 5 – Trooper Matt Schmitz responded to a cardiac arrest. A woman was in full arrest and first responders were rotating through CPR. Trooper Schmitz performed multiple rounds of compressions and assisted in direct medical care at the scene. His fast response directly contributed to a successful outcome. The victim survived this event and reunited with Trooper Schmitz and other first responders at a local city council meeting where they were recognized for their actions.

Trooper James Lee (East Metro District)

Sept. 19 – Trooper James Lee responded to a vehicle that went off the road, crashed into a sound barrier and was engulfed in flames. Trooper Lee pulled the unconscious driver out of the burning vehicle and dragged him up a steep embankment to safety. He then proceeded to administer life saving measures until medics arrived. The driver eventually regained consciousness.

Troopers Sandy Barg and Sam Catlin (Brainerd District)

This presentation is combined with a Minnesota State Patrol Commendation for **Officer Zach Gowens and Officer Mitch Morse of the Little Falls Police Department.**

Oct. 6 – Troopers Sandy Barg and Sam Catlin responded to a medical call. A woman suffered a seizure and was not breathing. Troopers Barg and Catlin began chest compressions. After multiple rounds, Officers Zach Gowens and Mitch Morse took over. Trooper Catlin delivered breaths to the victim through a bag valve mask. Trooper Barg inserted an oral airway. After multiple shocks by an AED, a slight pulse was detected and the woman began to breathe on her own. Troopers Barg and Catlin and Officers Gowens and Morse continued lifesaving care until medics arrived on scene.

Trooper Brady Winter (Detroit Lakes District)

Nov. 25 – Trooper Brady Winter arrived at the scene of an injury crash. Citizens at the scene were assisting the occupants of a vehicle on its side in the median. Trooper Winter noticed the other vehicle involved had caught fire and smoke was coming from the engine compartment. A bystander confirmed there was a passenger still inside. Trooper Winter emptied his fire extinguisher on the flames and removed a woman from the vehicle and pulled her to safety. Due to his quick assessment of the scene and timely actions, the woman's life was saved.

Chief's Commendation Award – Communications/911: This award is presented to radio communications operators who provide vital, life-saving services that lead to the rescue of a person, provide outstanding performance during a special event or provide a consistent, sustained high level of customer service.

RCS Sarah Johnson (Statewide Communications – Regional Transportation Management Center [RTMC])

Aug. 8 – A Dakota County Communications Center dispatcher fielded a call from a person in distress. During the call, the person entered a lane of traffic and was struck by a commercial vehicle and fatally



injured. Recognizing this as a traumatic event, RCS Johnson personally contacted the Dakota County dispatcher to check on her wellbeing and ensure she was receiving the assistance needed.

RCOs Amanda Dunkin, Mackenzie Marzolf, Will Persons and Charles Stoppel
(Statewide Communications – Southern Regional Communications Center [SRCC])

Aug. 19 – A State Trooper attempted to stop a vehicle for speeding near the city of Becker. The suspect vehicle continued to speed and rear-ended another vehicle occupied by three passengers. One passenger was killed and the two others were critically injured. The suspect ran from the scene. While law enforcement engaged in a dynamic scene, dispatchers provided the necessary elements to support and aid in the investigation that led to the apprehension of the driver, who was charged with third-degree murder and criminal vehicular homicide.

Exceptional Service Award: This award is presented to employees who have provided extraordinary service in the performance of their duties.

Lieutenant Aaron Struntz (Marshall District)

Dec. 25, 2022 – On Christmas night, a sprinkler pipe froze and burst, flooding a health care facility and requiring the evacuation of 35 residents. In frigid temperatures and extremely poor road conditions, Lieutenant Aaron Struntz led a convoy of vehicles through nearly impassable roads to transport the residents to another facility. Upon arrival, he shoveled the sidewalk and entryway of the receiving facility to make the transition of residents as safe as possible. Lieutenant Struntz consistently provides extraordinary service, going above and beyond to help those in need.

RCS Jamey Kime and RCOs Don Hakes, John Polz and Fabiola Rodriguez
(Statewide Communications – SRCC)

March 7 – Dispatch received notification that a murder suspect was believed to be en route from Nebraska to Minnesota. As information evolved, RCS Jamey Kime along with RCOs Don Hakes, John Polz and Fabiola Rodriguez worked with district supervisors, MSP Flight and county dispatchers, continuously updating and managing the event as it evolved. Their due diligence, planning and teamwork resulted in multiple suspects being safely apprehended.

RCO Jake Savat (Statewide Communications – SRCC)

May 30 – Deputies from the Blue Earth County Sheriff's Office and officers from the Mankato Police Department attempted a traffic stop on a suspect who was reported to be under the influence of a controlled substance and possibly armed. The suspect fled from law enforcement. RCO Jake Savat fielded a 911 call from an agitated man who he determined to be the suspect. He detected there was another person in the vehicle, possibly being held against her will. RCO Savat continued to monitor the call and relay all pertinent information and location updates to law enforcement. The suspect was ultimately apprehended.

Sergeant Jesse Anderson, Trooper Chad Kucza and Trooper Ed Stanek (Virginia District)

This presentation is combined with Minnesota State Patrol Commendations for:

Special Agent A.J. Morse – Bureau of Criminal Apprehension

Lieutenant Mark Weller, Lieutenant Kyle Curtiss, Sergeant Jake Olson, Deputy Nick O'Toole – Itasca County Sheriff's Office

Officer Ashley Moran – Grand Rapids Police Department



Meritorious Citizenship Awards for:

Holly Christensen – Holiday

Melissa Jewett – Cenex

Margie Schumacher – Cenex

Sept. 17 – Law enforcement responded to a fatal pedestrian hit-and-run. A deceased man was found at the scene along with two small pieces of car parts. Sergeant Jesse Anderson, Trooper Chad Kucza and Trooper Ed Stanek began an investigation. After extensive review of surveillance video provided by Holly Christensen (Holiday), Melissa Jewett and Margie Schumacher (Cenex), law enforcement began to actively look for two vehicles: an SUV and a pickup. Deputy Nick O’Toole located the pickup, but it evaded contact. Officer Ashley Moran later located the pickup at a residence. Special Agent A.J. Morse made contact with the pickup’s owner who identified the driver of the SUV as the party responsible for striking the pedestrian. Trooper Ed Stanek interviewed the SUV driver and observed damage consistent with striking a pedestrian. Multiple search warrants were executed for evidence by Lieutenant Mark Weller, Lieutenant Kyle Curtiss, Sergeant Jake Olson and Special Agent A.J. Morse. The driver of the SUV was charged with criminal vehicular homicide – hit and run. This case was solved due to the exceptional collaboration between law enforcement and community businesses.

Sergeant Dan Beasley (St. Cloud District)

Sergeant Dan Beasley’s extensive knowledge and experience in tracking evidence and evidence auditing were instrumental in the statewide deployment of the BEAST evidence software system. He traveled to each district to conduct inventory audits, conducted training sessions on multiple topics and assisted the project team with rollout. Sergeant Beasley continues to serve as a subject matter expert to districts across the state in all things evidence related.

Sergeant Eric Bormann (Rochester District)

Sergeant Eric Bormann is in his 26th year with the State Patrol and is a DRE/SFST instructor, phlebotomist, field training officer and a district delegate for the Trooper’s Association. He is passionate about detecting and arresting drug- and alcohol-impaired drivers. He is equally passionate about training other troopers, officers and deputies throughout the state in detecting impaired drivers. Sergeant Bormann is an exemplary trooper in all that he does, from enforcement and education to leadership and character.

RCS Sarah Johnson (Statewide Communications – RTMC)

Radio Communications Supervisor Sarah Johnson’s dedication to her role and commitment to the well-being of her colleagues is exceptional. She manages many critical administrative tasks and essential functions enabling the department to function effectively. Sarah is also committed to creating a positive and supportive work environment where employees can thrive. She regularly checks in with others and takes the initiative to ensure new staff feel welcome. Sarah is an inspiration to her colleagues and a true example of exceptional leadership.

Kathy Craft (Training and Development Section)

Kathy Craft has been an extremely valuable team member of the Training and Development Section for nine years. Kathy is responsible for the tracking and documentation of all training records, logistics and day-to-day administrative duties at Camp Ripley. Over the last year, Kathy has been an exceptional resource to a new lieutenant and a new EVOG and Firearms Coordinators at Camp Ripley, as well as taking on additional duties. Kathy is always willing to assist where she is needed, is extremely humble and positive in her role,



and demonstrates the core values of the agency on a daily basis.

Lt. Andrew Martinek (West Metro District)

Lt. Andrew Martinek exhibits outstanding leadership and excellence in public safety through his personal actions, guidance and initiative. Beyond leading the busy Minneapolis patrol station, he accepts new challenges within the district and agency such as developing and leading the Traffic Incident Management program and being intimately involvement in the Drug Recognition and Standardized Field Sobriety Programs and Field Training Program. Lt. Martinek's drive for success, passion to go above and beyond and dedication to traffic safety is exceptional.

Sergeant Chad Mills and Trooper Anthony Butler (Investigative Services)

In a typical year, Sergeant Chad Mills and Trooper Tony Butler may train two to three new K-9s and handlers. In 2023, due to the legalization of cannabis, they trained six new K-9s and handlers. In addition, they trained two dogs from the BCA and AGED, conducted three separate handler schools, and rearranged their personal schedules to make two short-notice trips to Pennsylvania to select the new dogs for the program. That training paid off. During the North American Police Working Dog Association K-9 certification, all dogs exceeded the minimum passing score of 91.6 percent, the highest in the nation, with many teams attaining a perfect 100. Sergeant Mills and Trooper Butler lead with excellence and are instrumental the success of the K-9 program.

Trooper James Noxon (East Metro District)

Trooper James Noxon has been an instrumental member of the street racing enforcement team. On his second year of patrol, Trooper Noxon worked the street racing detail every Friday and Saturday night during his regular shifts. Even on weekends off, he signed up for these shifts in the effort to remove these dangerous drivers from our roadways. Trooper Noxon dedicated countless hours at these street racing events to enforce the traffic laws and ultimately make our roadways a safe place for all.

Lieutenant Robert Zak (Investigative Services)

Lieutenant Robert Zak leads with excellence through collaboration, problem solving and innovation. Both the K-9 and crash reconstruction programs are successful due in large part to his approach to excellence and ability to mentor others through a lens of positivity. He continually strives for improvement by soliciting feedback from team members and proactively researches new ideas. Lieutenant Robert Zak is a respected leader and integral member of the Investigative Services Section.

Eagle Squadron Award

Each year, the Eagle Squadron Award is presented to the Minnesota State Patrol trooper who arrested the greatest number of impaired drivers the previous year.

Trooper Gustavo Culbeaux (West Metro District)

Impaired driving enforcement continues to be job number one for every State Patrol trooper. Aggressive enforcement in this important area saves countless lives and injuries each year. In 2023, Trooper Gustavo Culbeaux arrested 202 impaired drivers. In recognition of his efforts, he is presented with the Eagle Squadron Award.



Leadership Award: This award is presented yearly to the employee who consistently exhibits outstanding leadership and excellence in public safety through their personal actions, guidance, direction and professional involvement.

Major Jeremy Geiger (Headquarters)

In addition to leading the agency down the path of national accreditation, Major Geiger's efforts with the Street Racing Enforcement Project have become a model for other states and he is often sought out for his advice on best practices. Illegal street racing in the Twin Cities became a significant and consistent problem in the summer of 2020, creating dangerous intersections and roadways and causing property damage. Historically, there has been a propensity for assaults and shootings at these events. Prior to the project, some events would draw up to 250 vehicles and 500 people. Major Geiger brought together multiple law enforcement agencies to curb this dangerous criminal behavior. His strategic plan, which required continual staffing each weekend, has disrupted the street racing community, with as few as 25 vehicles now at events during the height of summer. Major Geiger's organization of resources and collaborative efforts have changed the landscape of street racing and the illegal behaviors associated with it in Minnesota.

Civilian Employee of the Year: This award is presented to the non-sworn employee who best demonstrates outstanding work performance, initiative, leadership and effective interpersonal relations.

Sam Kunjummen (MNIT - Headquarters)

Sam works in our IT section and takes great pride in his work, which is demonstrated by the great lengths he goes to as he ensures that all systems integral to our agency remain online. Many members of the agency keep Sam's phone number at the ready and when called upon at all hours of the day, he quickly troubleshoots any issues. Twenty-three members of the agency from districts throughout the state submitted examples of exemplary work and what a genuinely nice human being Sam is. He has resolved issues at all hours of the day and night, on holidays and while on vacation. We are extremely fortunate to keep Sam in our ranks as he has a heart for public service.

Trooper of the Year: This award is presented to the Trooper who best demonstrates outstanding work performance, initiative, leadership and effective interpersonal relations.

Trooper Nick Diederich (Brainerd District)

Trooper Diederich demonstrates exemplary work performance, initiative, leadership and interpersonal relations. Last year he initiated 1,591 traffic stops, investigated 45 crashes and offered public assistance 134 times. He is known to many new drivers as he takes time to conduct traffic safety presentations at many of the area high schools and other venues. Multiple people who were stopped by Trooper Diederich reached out to say they were impressed with his professional demeanor and approach to the stop, and families from several crashes thanked him for being helpful and compassionate to their families during such difficult times. During one traffic stop, a young adult broke down and had a mental health crisis. They had a long roadside conversation and Trooper Diederich gave them his business card so they could call and talk anytime. This interaction helped the driver get professional help. Trooper Diederich always displays an exemplary image of the State Patrol and has impeccable job related attributes that make him the Trooper of the Year.

