Treat Reckless Driving Causing Death as a Violent Felony in California

Issue:
California experiences thousands of traffic fatalities every year. While each death is tragic, the legal system treats most traffic deaths as accidents rather than preventable violent acts. Reckless or negligent drivers who kill often face light penalties, probation, or no charges at all. This fails to reflect the value of human life and does not deter repeat offenders.

Current Legal Framework:

- Traffic deaths are typically prosecuted as **vehicular manslaughter**, which requires proving gross negligence or recklessness.
- Many fatal collisions are treated as **"ordinary negligence"**, carrying misdemeanor charges or minimal sentencing.
- Drivers who flee the scene or use drugs/alcohol may face slightly higher penalties, but these remain insufficient to deter future offenses.
- California law emphasizes intent (mens rea), even though reckless driving inherently carries a foreseeable risk of death.

Consequences:

- Light penalties fail to reflect the **gravity of taking a human life**.
- Repeat offenders often remain on the road, continuing to pose serious threats.
- Families of victims suffer trauma without seeing justice or meaningful accountability.
- Public safety is compromised; vehicles are treated as tools, not lethal weapons.
- Enforcement prioritizes convenience over deterrence, contributing to preventable fatalities.

Policy Proposal:
California must **reframe fatal reckless driving as a violent felony** to protect human life and prevent repeat offenses:

1. **Redefine culpability:** Treat deaths caused by grossly reckless driving (e.g., excessive speed, DUI, distraction, aggressive driving) as a **felony offense** equivalent to violent crimes.
2. **Enhance penalties:** Require mandatory prison time for vehicular killings caused by reckless conduct, with longer sentences for fleeing the scene or repeat offenses.
3. **Automatic license and vehicle restrictions:** Immediate suspension of driving privileges and restrictions on vehicle operation for convicted offenders.
4. **Prioritize deterrence:** Establish clear, predictable consequences so that potential offenders understand the life-and-death stakes of reckless driving.

5. **Public reporting and transparency:** Track outcomes, repeat offenses, and enforcement metrics to ensure accountability and continuous policy improvement.

Rationale:

- Reckless driving that causes death is **foreseeably lethal**; legal consequences should reflect that risk.
- Stronger penalties will **deter repeat offenses** and signal that human life is valued above convenience.
- Aligns with California's **Vision Zero goals**, which aim to eliminate traffic fatalities through systemic changes, including enforcement.

Call to Action:

- Amend the Penal Code to classify fatal reckless driving as a violent felony.
- Establish mandatory sentencing guidelines to reflect the seriousness of killing another person.
- Ensure enforcement and oversight are resourced adequately to prevent avoidable fatalities.

Conclusion:
Every human life is priceless. California law must **treat reckless driving that kills as a serious, violent offense**. Light penalties not only fail victims' families but also endanger the public. Legislative action is necessary to create accountability, save lives, and restore trust in the justice system.