

Lawmakers pushing restrictions for youth drivers

By Bryan Corbin

INDIANAPOLIS — If Indiana lawmakers get their way, young drivers soon won't be able to use cell phones while driving in the state.

They also will have to wait longer to earn their driver's licenses, and they'll be more restricted in the hours they can drive and passengers they can carry, under a proposal unveiled Monday.

Lawmakers and traffic safety advocates say the graduated driver's license bill, Senate Bill 16, would cut the number of teen-driving fatalities in Indiana. Last year, there were 153 drivers between ages 15 and 20 killed on Indiana roadways, officials said.

"Every weekend we can count on having a few trauma patients as a result of teenaged driving," said Stephanie Lefler, director of trauma services at St. Mary's Medical Center in Evansville. "It is a problem in Evansville as it is in Indiana. It's the highest mechanism of injury for teenagers, and the injuries and the disability resulting from motor-vehicle collisions are tremendous."

Although Indiana in recent years has cracked down on drunk driving - lowering the legal limit to .08 percent blood-alcohol, for example - the new legislative effort is focusing on distracted driving by the youngest, least-experienced drivers. Multiple teens piling into a single car, with loud conversation and an even louder stereo - even text-messaging while driving - was described as a scenario for disaster.

"Young drivers are not bad drivers; they are inexperienced, immature and overconfident. They are prone to peer pressure, inclined to take risks and increasingly distracted and tempted to multitask behind the wheel," said Sherry Deane, public affairs specialist with the AAA Hoosier Motor Club, which supports the legislation. "We're not trying to penalize teens with this ... we are simply trying to keep them alive."

Kira Hudson of Carmel, Ind., recalled how at age 20 she was driving on a straight stretch of road while talking on her cell phone. She swerved to avoid a squirrel in the road and overcorrected, causing the car to roll over. The crash left Hudson a paraplegic.

"I definitely think that if I was not on my cell phone, I would not be in the wheelchair today," Hudson, now 24, said Monday at the Statehouse. "I'm in full support of not seeing any more teens die or be injured from cell phone distractions or any other distractions."

Senate Bill 16, authored by Sen. Travis Holdman, R-Markle, and introduced into the 2009 session of the Legislature, would do several things:

- Prohibit drivers younger than 18 from using cell phones or other hand-held or hands-free telecommunications devices while driving.
- Increase the minimum age a teen can get a learner's permit. For those who have taken driver's education, the age would be 15 years and 6 months instead of the current age of 15. Without driver's education, a teen could not get a learner's permit until age 16.
- Require youngsters with learner's permits to complete 50 hours of supervised practice driving, either with a parent, instructor or other licensed driver age 25 or older, before they can obtain a probationary license.
- Lawmakers said they envisioned teen drivers and parents keeping a logbook, although the bill in its introduced version does not include a way of verifying that 50 hours of supervised driving are completed. Current law has no supervised-driving requirements.
- Increases the age to get a probationary license, the intermediate step, to 16 years and 6 months for those who have taken driver's education, and to age 17 for those who haven't. Current law is 16 years and one month for those with driver's ed, and 16 1/2 without it.
- Requires probationary drivers to display a Bureau of Motor Vehicles placard or sticker in the rear window.
- Restricts driving hours for probationary licensees, prohibiting them from driving between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. for the first six months. Exceptions would be driving from work, school or religious functions, or when accompanied by a licensed driver 25 or older. Under the current law, driving hours now mirror the state curfew law, which allows minors to be out until 11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and until 1 a.m. Friday and Saturday nights.
- Prohibits driving with passengers for the first 180 days (except with siblings or the driver's own child) unless accompanied by an older licensed driver, at least age 25.

Collisions involving teen drivers with multiple unrelated passengers are common. "Even though people may assume drugs and alcohol are involved, most of the time there is not," said Lefler, the St. Mary's trauma director. "A lot of time, there are multiple passengers in the car - weekend, night time, it happens during the day, too. You can kind of predict when you will see more of these crashes coming in (to the emergency room)."

A previous version of the bill failed to pass in an earlier session. But Senate Transportation Chairman Thomas Wyss, R-Fort Wayne, said Senate Bill 16 will be the first that his committee hears in the upcoming session that starts Jan. 7; and Wyss predicted it will pass in the Republican-controlled state Senate. Two majority House Democrats, Rep. Peggy Welch, D-Bloomington, and Rep. Cleo Duncan, D-Greencastle, said Monday they would sponsor the bill in the Democrat-controlled Indiana House