

National Safety Council Urges Total Ban on Cell Use While Driving

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The National Safety Council is pushing lawmakers in all states to ban the use of cell phones while driving. It's also urging businesses to institute specific policies that ban workers from driving while using handsets. The group cites several studies that suggest a dangerous relationship between cell phones and crashes, including one from Utah that suggests hands-free devices do not help.

The National Safety Council (NSC) has called on drivers to stop using cell phones and other communication devices while driving. The organization has also encouraged businesses to institute policies prohibiting their employees from driving and using a mobile phone. In addition, the NSC called on the governors and legislators of all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia to pass laws banning the use of cell phones while driving.

A study conducted by the Harvard Center of Risk Analysis found that cell phone use while driving plays a role in 6 percent of accidents. That is equivalent to 636,000 crashes, 330,000 injuries, 12,000 serious injuries and 2,600 deaths every year. The financial toll of mobile phone related accidents, according to the study, is US\$43 billion.

"Studies show that driving while talking on a cell phone is extremely dangerous and puts drivers at a four times greater risk of a crash. Driving drunk is also dangerous and against the law. When our friends have been drinking, we take the car keys away. It's time to take the cell phone away," said Janet Froetscher, president and CEO of the NSC.

Demolition Derby

Using a cell phone or other communication device while driving may be less distracting than other activities; however, talking and texting have become much more prevalent, according to Froetscher. Opting for a hands-free device is no safer, according to a University of Utah study. Conversely, another study found that talking to passengers actually leads to safer driving by adults because passengers help alert drivers to potential driving risks.

Drivers on the job are responsible for a significant amount of cell phone usage in vehicles, according to the NSC. Many businesses have already acknowledged the injuries and costs associated with this behavior, implementing policies prohibiting the usage of cell phones by employees while driving.

"The risk is based on research comparing driver cell phone records with actual crashes. That research shows the risk of a crash is four times higher when drivers are on the phone," Russ Rader, an Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) spokesperson, told TechNewsWorld.

Driving Safety

The NSC has planned a three-fold approach as it pushes for change. First, the organization will advocate for legislation. Next, it will begin educating the public and businesses about the dangers of using cell phones while driving. Finally, the NSC will supplement distracted driving content in its training of 1.5 million people every year in defensive driving.

However, while laws banning all cell phone use behind the wheel make sense based on the research, it is unclear that these laws will have any effect on behavior, explained Rader.

"A study in New York, which had the first handheld cell phone ban in the country, found that observed handheld phone use dropped by 50 percent when the law first took effect. But a year later, after the media coverage had gone away, observed use had gone right back up to where it was before. Absent tough, sustained, visible enforcement, it's unlikely any of these laws will have much impact on cell phone use by drivers," he pointed out.

The Governor's Highway Safety Association welcomes the NSC's involvement but do not support a ban, according to Jonathan Adkins, the organization's communications director.

"We don't support a ban because they are not easy to enforce," he told TechNewsWorld. "Companies can ban cell phone use by drivers, school bus drivers and even teens. But while we welcome the discussion, we don't support a ban, as it would be very difficult for law enforcement to tell if a driver was on the phone or not. Cell phone use and driving is big problem, but one without solution. We are focused more on education. States already have reckless or careless driving laws, we don't want to get lost in this argument about what we should ban. We want to focus on education and get people using common sense again while they are driving," he said