

Va. Law Targets Teen Crashes

Washington Post Staff Writers

Teens who drink and drive in Virginia face stiff new penalties beginning July 1, when dozens of new laws take effect, including measures related to the payday lending industry and mental health services.

The General Assembly voted in March to institute the tougher penalties to curb the number of accidents involving teens who drink and drive, known in some circles as baby DUIs.

Previously, those younger than 21 who had consumed alcohol but were not legally drunk before getting behind the wheel faced fines, community service and a license suspension of up to six months. Under the new law, such an offense qualifies as a misdemeanor and carries a mandatory one-year driver's license suspension, among other punishments.

The penalties will be a strong deterrent for teens tempted to drink and drive, said Kurt Gregory Erickson, president of the Washington Regional Alcohol Program, which lobbies for stricter laws combating drinking and driving.

"There is never going to be the political will to jail teens, and by and large any fines that get assessed are going to be paid by the parents," he said. "But I don't think there's a single 18-year-old in the Commonwealth of Virginia who wants their mother to drive them to a date."

Thirteen teens died in the fall in car accidents in the Washington area. In Virginia, 46 teens died in alcohol-related car crashes in 2006, the latest figure available from the Department of Motor Vehicles.

In Maryland, where most of the deaths in the fall occurred, the spate prompted the General Assembly to pass two teen driving laws that go into effect Oct. 1. The first requires the state Motor Vehicle Administration to notify the parents or guardians of a minor who receives a citation for any moving violation. The second extends the period during which a learner's permit is valid, from one year to two years after the date of issuance. It also prohibits minors from driving without a learner's permit, even if under the supervision of a driving instructor.

Steps to prevent underage drinking and driving are being considered in the District as well. In February, several D.C. Council members introduced legislation that would require anyone younger than 21 applying for a driver's license or a learner's permit to complete a two-hour drug and alcohol awareness class.