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GRADUATED DRIVERS RESTRICTIONS MUCH-NEEDED IN STATE



An Op-Ed by State Rep. David Scribner

On October 4, a 17 year old driver, likely driving at an excessive rate of speed, and his two teenage passengers lost their lives in a Wolcott car accident. Sadly, it was not the first serious accident in which the driver who died in this tragedy displayed poor judgment. Returning from a memorial service for one of the teens on October 8, a Bristol youth was arrested for driving more than 100 mph.

These incidents illustrate the need for placing certain restrictions on Connecticut's teen drivers and according to the Department of Motor Vehicles Commissioner Robert M. Ward, the state is researching its ability to suspend licenses of drivers who exhibit such poor judgment.

In 2003, I was the chief proponent of legislation that enacted graduated driver's license restrictions on newly licensed, 16 and 17 year old drivers. As Ranking Member of the Legislature's Transportation Committee, I worked this year to see the passage of legislation that extends those restrictions to drivers in that age group with learner's permits. This legislation took effect on October 1.

The learner's permit holder is trained to drive through a driving school, home instruction or a combination of the two. These new restrictions apply in any situation when the learner's permit holder is receiving any kind of training by a parent or another adult.

Under the previous law, 16 and 17 year olds with learner's permits were not limited to the number of passengers they could have had in a car. Instead, they were merely required to drive with a licensed driver of at least 20 years of age. This requirement stood in contrast to how the law treats newly licensed drivers, who are subjected to stiffer passenger restrictions for the first six months. Newly licensed teens can only initially drive with their parent or another licensed driver and after three months only with other family members. Now, those with learner's permits are subject to these same restrictions.

Graduated licensing laws were designed to limit distractions for teenagers and help them develop effective driving skills. This recognizes the fact that motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among fifteen to twenty year olds (according to the National

Center for Health Statistics). According to a study released in February by State Farm Insurance Co. and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, a single teenage passenger with a teen driver doubles the risk of a fatal crash, while the risk is five times higher when two or more teens ride along.

In addition to the passenger restrictions noted above, Connecticut's graduated licensing law prohibits a sixteen or seventeen-year old who has an operator's license from driving between midnight and 5:00 a.m. unless the person is driving for work, to a school activity, or out of medical necessity. Exemptions are made for ambulance, fire and EMS personnel who are 16 or 17 years of age.

Graduated driver's license laws not only help protect the lives of teen drivers and their passengers, they make the road safer for all motorists and pedestrians. However, it must be noted that the pro-active involvement and discipline by parents and law enforcement can also play a major role in preventing teen driving tragedies. To learn more about graduated driver's license restrictions, visit the Department of Motor Vehicles website's (www.ct.gov/dmv) "Teen Drivers" section.