

TESTIMONY

OF

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PRESENTED

TO THE

HOUSE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE ON
GRADUATED LICENSING

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Nationwide, traffic crashes are the number one cause of youth deaths. In light of the serious safety concerns associated with young inexperienced drivers, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administration (AAMVA) have proactively encouraged states to improve their systems for licensing young drivers.

In guidelines published jointly for driver licensing administrators, NHTSA and AAMVA define graduated licensing as a system designed to ease beginning drivers into the traffic environment under controlled exposure to progressively more difficult driving experiences. The system helps improve their driving skills and helps them acquire on-the-road experience by progressing, or graduating, through licensing stages before unrestricted licensure.

The system consists of three licensing stages, named by the type of license possessed at each stage: learner's permit, intermediate or provisional license, and a full or unrestricted license. In 1996, NHTSA and AAMVA identified only eight states with three stages of licensing: California, Colorado, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Wisconsin. A few other states have joined our ranks in the last

year and a half in order to effectively address the critical safety problem of young drivers.

Historically, Pennsylvania has been a leader in the nation with its three stage licensing system by requiring a learner's permit and a junior driver's license for 16 year old drivers prior to issuance of a regular license. The junior driver's license incorporates important features of graduated licensing including:

1. Restricted hours of driving, unless supervised by a parent or guardian or a spouse at least 18 years old (i.e. no driving between midnight and 5 a.m.).
2. A system of more rapid sanctioning when convicted of traffic offenses.
3. Successful completion of a certified driver's education program required for issuance of a regular driver's license at 17 years of age.
4. A clean driving record is also required for issuance of a regular license at 17 years of age (i.e. the junior driver may not have any traffic convictions and may not have been involved in an accident for which they are partially or fully at fault).

At the same time, young inexperienced drivers remained the highest risk drivers on Pennsylvania's roads. In recent years, PennDOT has pursued the following enhancements to our graduated licensing system.

- PennDOT greatly improved the knowledge test by automating the test and expanding the number of potential test questions to 279 questions. Our knowledge test no longer focuses only on traffic signs and rules of the road but also includes important safety questions regarding safe driving decisions and road courtesy (how to avoid aggressive driving), safety concerns when driving in traffic, the risk associated with speeding, and DUI. This approach to testing ensures that new drivers have a broad knowledge base prior to receiving their learner's permit.
- PennDOT implemented a mandatory 30 day waiting period between the initial issuance of the learner's permit and the licensing skills test.
- PennDOT replaced the off road testing course with an on road test. Today, every Driver License Center in the state conducts the driver's test on the road in traffic conditions to ensure that every newly licensed driver has the basic skill to handle a vehicle safely.

- In partnership with the Department of Education, PennDOT funded a research project to develop and implement a greatly improved curriculum for driver's education. The new curriculum relies on an analysis of accident patterns of young, inexperienced drivers to develop more effective mechanisms to improve their on-road performance. This new curriculum is being piloted and will be implemented statewide.
- PennDOT implemented a zero tolerance law for underage drinking drivers.

Unfortunately, even with these program enhancements, young inexperienced drivers are still the highest risk drivers on Pennsylvania's highways. In 1996, 13% of Pennsylvania's 16 year old drivers were involved in reportable accidents. In fact, one out of eight 16 year old male drivers had a reportable accident before their 17th birthday. In light of this serious safety problem, PennDOT continues to evaluate the way in which we license young novice drivers and is considering the following enhancements of our graduated licensing system.

1. NHTSA and AAMVA recommend that the learner's permit stage last six months and that the young driver remain crash and conviction free during this timeframe before moving to the junior driver's license. Driving is a

very complex psychomotor skill that can only be learned through extensive practice. Recently Maryland enhanced its graduated licensing system by requiring young drivers to hold a learner's permit for four months prior to moving to the next stage of licensure.

PennDOT is considering increasing the 30 day waiting period and is assessing the best timeframe to ensure that every young driver has ample opportunity to develop the skills they need to drive safely.

2. NHTSA and AAMVA recommend that states require parental participation in assuring that young drivers acquire safe driving skills. Parental involvement is key to successful driver's education because extensive behind-the-wheel practice for a sustained time period is essential to developing safe driving skills and safe driving habits. PennDOT is considering that parents certify that the novice driver had a minimum number of adult supervised miles of driving prior to being tested for junior driver's license. Based on my experience at driver license centers, I know that most parents show caring concern for the safety of their young, novice driver. However, too often they do not understand the importance of their involvement to ensure that the new driver practices extensively in order to become a skilled driver.

3. NHTSA and AAMVA recommend that states adopt youth oriented and more rapid driver improvement actions for junior license holders. Although PennDOT holds authority to suspend junior driver's licenses up to 90 days or until the junior driver is 18, this authority is discretionary. PennDOT is considering changes to this system, including the possibility that junior drivers who accumulate six points lose their driving privilege for a mandatory 90 day period.

In other driver safety areas, the certainty of suspension has proved to be an effective tool in improving young drivers' on road performance. For example, when Pennsylvania's underage drinking law went into effect in 1988, the number of underage drinking drivers involved in crashes declined dramatically and this decline has been sustained (i.e. there were 2,597 crashes in 1988 and 1,275 crashes involving underage drinking drivers in 1996). For junior license holders who accumulate six points for a second time, we recommend a mandatory revocation of the driving privilege until the novice license holder is 18 years old.

4. PennDOT is evaluating the potential effectiveness of notifying parents when junior license holders are

convicted of traffic offenses. Under Pennsylvania law, parental consent is required for drivers under 18 to hold a license, and parents may withdraw their consent at any time. In 1997 only 89 parents withdrew their consent and we want to ensure that they are aware of this authority.

PennDOT remains committed to continuing to improve the way in which we license young, novice drivers and will continue to refine our graduated licensing program. However, only through a partnership among PennDOT, the young driver, parents or guardians and law enforcement will we ultimately be able to ensure that every young driver we license has an opportunity to become a safe driver.

Thank you.