

TESTIMONY OF TED LEONARD
Before the HOUSE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
on the subject of GRADUATED DRIVER LICENSING (GDL)

APRIL 7, 1998

Good Morning, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Transportation Committee, other members and guests.

Thank you for convening this forum and allowing us the opportunity to discuss teen driving and young driver licensing. It is very appropriate, timely, and necessary for the General Assembly to examine our "young driver problem."

What exactly is our "young driver problem?" Very simply, our teen drivers are killing themselves and others in traffic accidents at an epidemic rate. Nearly every legislator in the General Assembly is probably aware of a teen driver in their district who has met with death or serious injury in a car accident. This is not just a Pennsylvania problem; it is occurring in every state in the country. While every traffic fatality is deeply regrettable, the loss of a young life and all its potential is particularly tragic.

Car crashes are the **NUMBER ONE** cause of death for 15 to 20 year olds. No other form of injury or disease is as great a threat to our teens' safety. Motor vehicle crashes account for more teen deaths than homicide, suicide, cancer, heart disease, or other forms of injury. Teen drivers are disproportionately represented in fatality statistics - last year, in Pennsylvania, they accounted for 13 percent of traffic fatalities, while making up only 4 percent of the driving population. Forty-five percent of all 16 and 17 year-old girls that die, do so as a result of an automobile accident. Among boys of the same age, 36 percent of deaths are due to crashes. Nationwide, the crash rate for teens is 4 times higher than for adults.

What are the problems contributing to the high rate of young driver crashes ?

- ***Inexperience:*** Novice drivers simply lack the real-world skills to drive in all road conditions and environments. Young driver accidents typically involve single vehicle run-off-the-road crashes and hitting fixed objects such as trees, embankments, and other stopped cars.
- ***High risk behavior:*** Characteristics of young drivers include a feeling of invulnerability, immaturity, and impulsiveness leading to poor driving judgement and participation in high risk behaviors such as speeding and traveling too fast for conditions. These behaviors are particularly evident with an increase in the number of teen passengers who accompany a teen driver. Studies have shown that allowing passengers to ride with 16 year old drivers increases their chances of being involved in a fatal crash by 100 percent through added distractions, peer pressure, and encouragement to drive unsafely. A lack of seatbelt use is also evident in teen crashes. The use of alcohol is also a significant factor in teen crashes. Twenty-one percent of teens involved in fatal crashes had been drinking.
- ***High risk exposure:*** Novice drivers drive during nighttime high-risk hours, again, often with young passengers. The risk of fatal crashes for teenagers is highest between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Fifty-five percent of fatal teen crashes occur between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

To address this nationwide problem of teen driving deaths, the American Automobile Association is advocating a program of graduated licensing. Mistakes are part of any learning process, including driving. The issue is how to minimize the likelihood that crashes will occur while young people are learning to drive. Graduated licensing is designed to ease beginning drivers into the driving environment by progressing or graduating through driver licensing stages before unrestricted licensing. Typically in a graduated license system, novice drivers progress through three stages: the learners permit,

an intermediate license, and full license. While the Pennsylvania licensing system, contains these three stages, and many good components, we feel additional components could be added to improve the teen driving learning experience.

AAA recommends the following key components for a graduated license system:

1. A minimum of six months stages 1 and 2
2. Night time driving restrictions
3. Teenage passenger restrictions
 - two-thirds of all teen age passenger deaths occur in crashes in which another teen is driving
4. Mandatory use of seat belts
5. Increased behind-the-wheel driving experience
 - 100 total parent/instructor certified hours - 50 hours in each of stage 1 and 2
6. Successful completion of a road and a written test in each stage

Are Graduated License Programs effective ?

Evaluations in three states show the benefits of a graduated licensing program. California reported a 5 percent reduction in crashes for drivers ages 15-17. Maryland reported a 5 percent reduction in crashes and a 10 percent reduction in traffic convictions for drivers age 16-17. Oregon reported a 16 percent reduction in crashes for male drivers age 16-17. An evaluation in New Zealand reported an 8 percent reduction in crashes for drivers ages 15-19. Additionally, the states of Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, North Carolina, and Ohio have implemented full Graduated Driver Licensing Programs.

I'd like to thank the committee for this opportunity to present our views, and say that we are willing to work in any way with legislators and the committee to address the problem of teen driving. We can't afford to lose any more teen lives.

