

Kurt J. Myers
Deputy Secretary for Safety Administration
Pennsylvania Department of Transportation

Kurt J. Myers was appointed Deputy Secretary for Safety Administration for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) in June 2007. In this position, Myers oversees nearly 1,200 driver and vehicle services employees who provide quality customer services while keeping the safety and security of the commonwealth's 8.5 million licensed drivers and 11.1 million registered vehicle owners a paramount focus.

As Deputy Secretary for Safety Administration, Myers oversees key highway safety improvements relating to driver behavior, a customer-conscious business approach, implementation of motorist-related legislation, and integration of new initiatives that improve customer services, streamline processes and upgrade quality through the use of new technologies. Myers is also responsible for the regulatory oversight of approximately 5,000 new and used car dealers, 2,500 agents, 17,000 vehicle safety inspection stations and over 7,000 emissions inspections stations.

Prior to being named deputy secretary, Myers served as director of PennDOT's Bureau of Motor Vehicles, where he was responsible for the titling and registration of vehicles and overseeing approximately 5,000 new and used car dealers, 2,500 issuing agent, 17,000 vehicle safety inspection stations and over 7,000 emissions inspections stations. Before joining PennDOT in 1998, Myers served as chairman of the board for Amalgamated Automotive Industries, Inc.

Myers is a central Pennsylvania native and received a bachelor of arts degree from Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio in 1978.

**TESTIMONY OF DEPUTY SECRETARY KURT MYERS
PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
HOUSE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
JULY 24, 2007**

Good morning. My name is Kurt Myers and I am the Deputy Secretary for PennDOT's Safety Administration. I also have with me Janet Dolan, Director of PennDOT's Bureau of Driver Licensing. On behalf of Secretary of Transportation Allen Biehler, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on HB163 and HB1141.

Before addressing HB163 and HB1141, I would like to provide an overview of some of the significant safety statistics relating to 16 and 17-year-old driver crashes and fatalities, briefly discuss the improvements that have been made in Pennsylvania and then talk specifically about how HB163 and HB1141 would improve our current Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) program to keep our most at-risk drivers, their passengers and those of us who share the road with these drivers safe.

According to recent studies, the number one killer of 15-20-year olds nationwide and here in Pennsylvania remains traffic crashes. Although Pennsylvania's current GDL program was a major enhancement to young driver safety, there are still improvements that can be made to help address young driver safety.

We have achieved a reduction in the number of the crashes and fatalities for 16 and 17-year-old drivers as a result of the GDL provisions that went into effect in 1999, we need to constantly reevaluate countermeasures, crashes and fatalities, the causes and the environment. It has been nearly ten years since these improvements were made; now is time to consider additional provisions to the GDL Program. Now is the time to look at ways to further mitigate the risk factors for young drivers. And, I think that is where we find ourselves today – considering additional countermeasures that will reduce and mitigate the risk of crashes and fatalities for young drivers.

GDL programs have been very effective nationwide. AAA Foundation for Highway Safety published a study in 2007 evaluating the effectiveness of GDL programs by determining how many of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) seven most common GDL criteria states had, and then compared crash statistics. States that have five of the seven criteria had 38% less fatal crashes involving a young driver than those states not having any GDL criteria, and states with four of the seven criteria had 21% less fatal crashes than those states not having any GDL criteria. Pennsylvania will meet six of NHTSA's seven most common GDL criteria, if passenger restrictions are implemented.

Both nationally and in Pennsylvania, the trends for fatalities involving young drivers have declined since the late 1990s, but there have been year-to-year fluctuations. In 1999, significant enhancements were made to the young driver licensing process. We followed the NHTSA graduated driver licensing model as the guide to incorporate the most nationally recognized improvements into Pennsylvania's Graduated Licensing Program. Those improvements were:

- A requirement for certification of fifty hours behind-the-wheel skill-building
- A requirement for a mandatory period of six-months for skill-building
- A requirement that the supervising adult in the car with the young driver must be at least 21
- A requirement that the nighttime driving curfew begin at 11pm
- A requirement for stricter sanctioning for junior drivers—a mandatory suspension of 90 days for a young driver who accumulates six or more points or has a high speed conviction of 26 miles an hour or more above the posted speed limit
- A requirement that young drivers can have no more passengers in their car than available seat belts

There are a little over 113,000 16 and 17-year-old drivers in Pennsylvania, about one percent of our driving population, which is approximately 8.5 million licensed drivers. This age group however is involved in about 4.5 percent of all fatalities. In 2006, there were 68 fatalities involving 16 and 17-year-old drivers. Overall, there were 1,525 fatalities in Pennsylvania in 2006.

Since 1999, there has been a clear reduction in fatalities involving 16-year-old drivers. With the latest data available for 2006, that equates to a 70 percent reduction in fatalities involving 16-year-old drivers. This is a positive indication that the changes are working. In real numbers – because that is what counts – this means that 42 fewer lives were lost in 2006 as compared to 1999 before improvements were made. (60 to 18). The same significant results have been revealed in crashes involving 16-year-old drivers as well; 3,200 fewer crashes in 2006 as compared to 1999 (6,203 to 3,003; 52 percent reduction).

I think it is also important to speak to crashes and fatalities involving 17-year-old drivers. While the number of crashes involving a 17-year-old driver has been declining since 1999 with some minor year-to-year fluctuations, it wasn't until 2006 that we saw the first significant decrease in fatalities involving a 17-year-old driver. However, we are concerned that it has taken until 2006 to realize significant reductions in fatalities involving a 17-year-old driver. These are drivers who have had a 6-month waiting period, 50 hours behind-the-wheel training and remain junior drivers until at least 17 and a half.

The current GDL program has done an excellent job of addressing driver training. It is now time to help our young drivers after they complete the required driver training and attain their junior driver's license. I do believe that passenger restriction would have an impact here. Passenger restriction is an effective tool that will help to limit the distractions young drivers face as they master the skills needed to safely operate a motor vehicle.

Driving is a very complex activity. Drivers must put together multifaceted evaluations, make split second decisions and perform intricate maneuvers. Young drivers and their lack of experience, immaturity and risk taking behavior create a potentially lethal mix. Many do not yet understand the complexity of driving. There are many elements to a comprehensive, young driver graduated licensing program. All elements need to work in concert. Passenger restrictions would improve our existing program by helping to reduce distractions; passenger restriction is a critical and necessary improvement to Pennsylvania's GDL Program.

Current legislation, HB163 and HB1141, addresses teenage passenger restriction – one of the NHTSA recommended criteria for GDL programs. These bills would limit the number of passengers under 18 years of age a junior driver may have in the vehicle to one, unless it is a family member, or in the case of HB163, there is also an exemption to allow for farm workers to travel between locations.

Young drivers generally transport more passengers than older drivers, and these passengers are usually their peers. Often, the combination of inattention or distraction, inexperience and immaturity is tragic. According to a 2000 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, crash risk increases from 39% with one passenger in the vehicle to 182% with three passengers.

The reasons are obvious. Additional passengers, especially teenage passengers, create distractions for drivers who are inexperienced to start with and who need to be paying full attention to the driving task. Plus, the presence of peers in the vehicle often induces young drivers to take risks. This has been cited in numerous studies, including a 1998 study published in the Accident Analysis and Prevention Journal.

Pennsylvania crash statistics show that in 2006, 22% of all fatal crashes involving a 16 or 17-year-old driver had two or more passengers in the vehicle. Also, in review of eight-year crash data involving a 16 or 17-year old driver (1999 to 2006) indicates that 27% of the fatal crashes occurred while the driver had two or more passengers in the vehicle. In addition, we find that the same type of issues that have historically contributed to young driver crashes continue to be problems. They include driving too fast for conditions (47%), and driver inexperience (17%) resulting in such things as over or under compensation at curves. It is also notable that 40% of the crashes that involved a major injury or fatality resulted from the driver hitting a fixed object. These statistics are based on 2006 crash data.

Our own statistics, the AMA, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, NHTSA and many other safety associations are calling upon states to put young driver passenger restrictions in place. Currently, thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia have passenger restrictions (most allowing for family member exemptions). Pennsylvania should, and PennDOT is very supportive of this direction.

PennDOT supports the provision of HB163 that addresses a seatbelt requirement for young drivers, which is also a part of the NHTSA recommended criteria for GDL programs. HB163 would make it a primary offense to transport a passenger under 18 years of age who is not properly restrained; however, as HB163 reads currently it would not make it a primary offense for a driver under 18 years of age who is not properly restrained. PennDOT feels this should be amended to make it a primary offense for the under 18-year-old driver as well.

It has been confirmed that teen drivers are less likely to wear seat belts. The analysis of PennDOT's 2006 fatality reports showed that over 56% of the young drivers killed were not wearing their seat belts.

Seatbelt use in Pennsylvania in 2006 was 86.3%, which is higher than the national average. The national average is 82%. This does not appear to hold true for young people. In 2006, 60% of people under the age of 18 who were killed in crashes were not properly restrained as compared to 40% of the total fatalities in PA who were not properly restrained.

HB163 also proposes eliminating the 15-day suspension requirement for young drivers who are cited for high speed violations. PennDOT would suggest this be amended to eliminate the Departmental Hearing currently required for high speed violations for young drivers as opposed to the 15-day suspension. We believe that suspensions are a highly effective tool for improving driver behavior. The American Journal of Preventive Medicine published a study in 1999 that indicated that suspensions are effective in lowering crash rates and future violations for up to two years after the end of the suspension.

I'd like to make one final point before I close. I cannot stress enough the importance of adult supervision of our young drivers – it is a critical component of keeping our young drivers safe. Parents/guardians must continue to take an active role in this process as they will be able to best gauge the young driver's knowledge, skills and maturity. To this point, PennDOT also supports HB163 provision, which calls for additional training for our young drivers, especially at night and during inclement weather.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that PennDOT supports passenger restrictions for junior driver's license holders, mandatory seatbelt use for all vehicle occupants under the age of 18 (with our proposed amendments), and suspending young drivers convicted of high speed violations for 105 days, and eliminating the need for the Departmental Hearing. But it cannot only be PennDOT working toward this goal. If we are to reduce crashes and fatalities for young drivers, it has to be a partnership among all of us...the General Assembly, law enforcement, all safety advocates, schools, parents, guardians, teen drivers and PennDOT.

We look forward to working with you, and I would be happy to take any questions that you may have. Thank you.