



**Written Testimony of Judith Lee Stone
President, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety
Hearing on Three Major Highway Safety Issues
Before the
House Transportation Committee, Pennsylvania General Assembly
On Site at the National Lifesavers Conference, Philadelphia, PA**

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on several effective laws that can play a crucial role in curbing motor vehicle fatalities and injuries on Pennsylvania roadways: primary enforcement of seat belts, graduated driver licensing (GDL) and distracted driving laws. Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (Advocates) is a coalition of consumer, safety, public health and medical groups, and insurance companies and organizations working together in state legislatures and in Congress to pass highway and auto safety laws that prevent unnecessary deaths and injuries.

Motor vehicle crashes occur in large numbers every day on our nation's roadways and caused nearly 40,000 deaths and injured 2.3 million people in 2008 (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration - NHTSA, 2009). The magnitude of the problem puts this squarely on the list of major U.S. public health epidemics, and the statistics speak for themselves.

Of the total number of 2008 fatalities, 6,428 teens and others who share the roads with them were killed in crashes involving a teen driver. In Pennsylvania, 1,468 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes that year, 242 of which involved a teen driver. In addition, in 2008, more than half (55%) of passenger vehicle occupants involved in crashes were not using seat belts, and there has been an alarming increase of the use of distracting technologies behind the wheel, both in Pennsylvania and across the nation. No matter the cause, these deaths and injuries are devastating and life-altering to families and communities at large.

Teen driving crashes involve many factors, including driver inexperience and immaturity, that result in poor judgment and inattention. The proven mechanism for reducing the number of fatalities and injuries involving teen drivers is an effective graduated driver licensing (GDL) system. GDL systems provide the framework for teens to learn driving skills over time, under adult supervision and with appropriate restrictions to avoid distracted driving, such as limitations on the number of other teen passengers and nighttime driving, and a ban on the use of cell phones while driving, including text messaging.

Another key lifesaving law that has proven to reduce fatalities and injuries is primary enforcement of seat belt laws. Seat belt use rates are 10-15 percentage points higher in states that have primary enforcement seat belt laws, and states that adopt a primary enforcement seat belt law see fatalities in motor vehicle crashes decrease by an estimated seven percent (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety - IIHS, 2009). Secondary enforcement seat belt laws send a mixed message about the importance of using a seat belt and are less effectively enforced.

Finally, many states have adopted or are considering text messaging bans for all drivers, or for beginning teen drivers, and bills governing cell phone use in general are of increasing interest in state legislatures. The use of these technologies when driving is highly distracting and more research data about the specific negative ramifications of distracted driving is being gathered and studied.

Because of the enormous number of people killed and injured year in and year out on our nation's roads, and the fact that proven solutions exist but are not employed in every state, the U.S. Congress has taken note and proposed several bills. The Safe Teen and Novice Driver Uniform Protection (STANDUP) Act is currently being considered that would establish minimum requirements for state graduated driver licensing systems. Several federal distracted driving bills are in play, and Congress is also considering strong legislation that would urge all states to upgrade their seat belt laws to primary enforcement.

For the past 20 years, Advocates has worked with state legislatures and the federal government alike to enact laws that have proven to change driver behavior and save lives. Our position is that when a public health epidemic reaches the costly and tragic level as demonstrated by annual motor vehicle crashes in the U.S., we need tough, effective laws in every state, and both federal and state governments have a role to play in making that happen.

Advocates wants to commend this committee for taking the time to hear from experts on these important issues, especially during the annual national Lifesavers Conference, held this year in your state. It shows your commitment to highway safety and willingness to collect information about the effectiveness of these laws. We encourage you to take aggressive action to adopt these and other public policies that will result in safer driving environments for all who use Pennsylvania's roads.

Thank you.

Judith Lee Stone, President
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety