Testimony on Distracted Driving Legislation
By
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Good Afternoon, Mister Chairman and members of the House Transportation Committee. Thank you for giving AAA the opportunity to address the issue of distracted driving.

It has long been recognized that drivers themselves cause the vast majority of crashes. Distracted driving, regardless of the cause, contributes to 25% to 30% (NHTSA) of vehicle crashes. We recognize it is difficult to eliminate all driver distraction through legislation therefore AAA supports a comprehensive approach to addressing distracted driving and believes any legislative or administrative proposal to address distracted driving should be based upon sound research and/or fundamental safety principles, and include a significant Education component. We support the establishment of laws with enhanced penalties for drivers who cause crashes or otherwise commit traffic violations as a result of engaging in distracting behavior while driving.

Distracted Driving is not a *new* issue. It's been around since the invention of windshield wipers in the early 1900's. Motor vehicle administrators gathered in an emergency meeting in 1929 to address the threat to highway safety that the introduction of the AM-radio would have on drivers. During the past century, wipers, AM-radios and a host of other innovations designed to enhance motorists' comfort, safety and convenience drew negative reaction until people learned to manage the distractions they caused. In the 1930's it was the radio; in the 50's, drive up windows and fast food; in the 80's, mobile phones and in the 90's, telematic devices. Rubbernecking, adjusting the radio, attending to children, reaching for the glove box or something that was dropped, talking to a passenger, eating and drinking, grooming, using a mobile phone, reading a map or programming a GPS device are all activities that divert a driver's attention from the task at hand and place the driver, passengers and others on the road at risk.

AAA has conducted studies and research on Distracted Driving. In 2003, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety conducted a study with the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center on the Role of Driver Distraction in Traffic Crashes. Researchers installed video cameras in the cars of volunteers from Pennsylvania and North Carolina. The study concluded that a broad range of distractions are common in everyday driving:

- Most driver distractions are neither new nor technological. Rather, they are aspects of everyday driving that people are likely to seldom think about – sipping coffee, reaching into the glove compartment, changing a CD or tending to a small child.

- All subjects were observed manipulating vehicle controls such as air conditioning or window controls, and nearly all (97%) reached for objects in the vehicle. Almost as many (91%) manipulated sound systems or were distracted by objects or events outside the vehicle (86%). Nearly three-fourths of drivers (71%) engaged in eating and drinking and 77% engaged in conversing with other passengers in the vehicle.
- Approximately one-third of the drivers used a cell phone while driving and 40% engaged in reading or writing.
- Child passengers were about four times, and infants about eight times, more likely to cause distraction than adult passengers.
- Drivers engaged in some form of distracting activity up to 16% of the total time their vehicles were moving.

Another AAA Foundation study identified, through crash and field data, the major sources of driver distraction that result in crashes or near misses, and the relative importance of these distractions as a cause of crashes. The study confirmed that mobile phones are a distraction. But the data also confirmed that other distractions such as looking at outside objects and tuning the radio or CD player also distract drivers. In decreasing order of magnitude, the distractions were:

Outside person, object or event – 29%
Adjusting radio/CD – 11%
Other occupant – 10%
Moving object in vehicle – 4%
Other device brought into vehicle – 3%
Vehicle climate controls – 3%
Eating, Drinking – 2%
Cell phone – 1.5%
Smoking – 1%

A December 2001 report of the Joint State Government Commission noted a similar hierarchy of distracting events. Additionally, a 1997 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* concluded that hands-free mobile phones are not risk free and distract drivers the same as hand-held phones. It is the conversation that distracts drivers, not the device. AAA has launched education campaigns to urge motorists to stay focused and keep their attention on the road.

AAA places distractions into three categories: Physical, Mental – or Both

Physical distractions like tuning a radio, eating, minding children, dialing a mobile phone or text messaging cause a driver to take his or her hands off the wheel or eyes off the road.

Mental activities, such as having a conversation or thinking about what to prepare for dinner take a driver's mind and attention off the road. How many times have you found your mind wandering while driving? Your eyes are on the road but your mind is not. It's

difficult to miss a large yellow school bus with red lights flashing, but how many drivers have driven past a loading school bus claiming they didn't "see" the bus when in reality, their mind wasn't on the task at hand.

Then, there is the combination of activities like reading a map, newspaper or text messages, or programming a GPS, that take a driver's hands, eyes and mind off the road.

All distractions cause drivers to react more slowly to traffic conditions or events, such as someone making a turn, yielding, stopping, pulling out suddenly or changing lanes.

Like earlier innovations, mobile phones and other in-vehicle electronic devices add a significant measure of convenience, safety and security to people's lives. But, concerns about their safe use are understandably growing. Among our highest risk population – teen drivers – the use of electronic communication devices is higher than the national average. According to a study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, teen drivers are most likely to be involved in distraction-related crashes. Statistically, teens are the most easily distracted drivers. Inexperience, immaturity and inclination to take risks lead to teen crashes. Distractions by teen passengers significantly increase the risk for a teen driver crash. A study at Johns Hopkins found that the chance a 16-year old will die in a crash increases 39% with a single passenger, 86% with two passengers and 182% with three or more passengers. A car full of teen passengers driven by a teen has been described by some as a rolling party barge – crashes just waiting to happen. That is why AAA supports stronger teen driving laws that include passenger restrictions for young drivers.

If you are driving your vehicle, you are already multitasking. You are operating a heavy machine at high speed; navigating changing terrain; calculating speeds and distances; and responding to other drivers and obstacles. Putting another activity in the mix – whether a physical distraction that causes you to take your hands off the controls or eyes off the road, or a mental distraction like a conversation with a passenger in the vehicle or on a hand held or hands free cell phone – the result is the same.

The bottom line is that drivers are responsible for keeping their eyes on the road and their minds on the task of driving.