

Testimony for HB 892 and HB 1684: Distracted Driving and Cell Phone Use

Good afternoon. My name is Gavin Gray, and I represent PennDOT's Highway Safety Section. On behalf of Secretary of Transportation Leslie Richards, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the status of distracted driving. The Department is strongly supportive of efforts to reduce distracted driving, which endangers the safety of PennDOT workers and the travelling public. Unfortunately, too often the public doesn't appreciate the dangers of distracted driving until it's too late. The Department supports the enhanced deterrents contained in the bills before the committee today and appreciates the commitment of funds raised through these penalties to education and awareness efforts.

Reducing crashes and fatalities due to distracted driving is tied to the safety focus areas in our Strategic Highway Safety Plan and as such, the Department of Transportation dedicates funding to promote education and awareness to the dangers of distracted driving. State crash data shows an 8.5% increase³ in distracted driving crashes and a 3.1% decrease³ in distracted driving fatalities from 2013 to 2017. Specific to cell phone use, the numbers show a 7.1% increase¹ in crashes involving a hand-held cell phone while the number of fatalities has remained level² during that same timeframe. Unfortunately, this is a difficult issue to accurately report because state and local police often do not have the necessary evidence or witnesses to make this determination during their crash investigations. Because of this we believe that these numbers are under reported. However, it should be noted that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has indicated that 94% of all crashes involve some type of human factor so there is enough data to establish these topics as a focal point in our safety efforts.

Our local safety partners and community outreach groups are encouraged to use the resources and public awareness materials from various national and state websites including ours (penndot.gov/safety). As part of these outreach efforts, a national media campaign also occurs each year during National Distracted Driving Awareness Month in April. It is hoped that our outreach programs supported by the media campaign will result in a reduction of crashes and fatalities on our roadways due to distracted driving.

We also monitor and support national research on this topic to ensure Pennsylvania stays in the forefront of safety countermeasures. For example, studies are currently underway to review risk communication strategies for distracted driving messages and to develop hazard perception and distracted driving training intervention for teens.

We would like to thank you for your continued interest in this topic as well as other safety issues that the Department faces. Our only suggestion would be to modify House Bill 1684 to align with the federal fund qualifying criteria established for 23 U.S.C. §405(e) and 23 U.S.C. §405(g). This would ensure that the Department receives the full amount of federal funding allotted to support educational outreach and enforcement for these topics.

Lastly, the Department urges the General Assembly to continue to review the results of Act 98 of 2011 which prohibited texting while driving, and to address gaps in the law which have prevented its full effectiveness in protecting the public from this other common form of distracted driving. While we must weigh the ramifications carefully anytime we impose heightened penalties, the increase in accidents and fatalities due to phone use while driving warrants continued evaluation for the protection of the public. At this time, I am available to take any questions you may have. Thank you.

HB 892 and 1684 Testimony (Supporting Data)

