

House Transportation Committee
Harrisburg, PA
Testimony House Bill 1684, PN 2261
Pennsylvania State Grange
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Chairmen Taylor and Keller and members of the House Transportation Committee:

Thank you very much for having the Pennsylvania State Grange speak about distracted driving.

As you may know, PA State Grange represents rural Pennsylvanians, both farmers and others. We have traditionally argued for statutory curbs to hand-held cell phone or texting while driving. Thus, we support House Bill 1684.

Scary Reality: Doing the Numbers

The statistics speak for themselves and other testifiers doubtless are giving similar numbers.

The PennDOT records from their web site Fact Sheet on Distracted Driving report:

In 2010, there were 13,846 crashes in Pennsylvania where distracted driving played a role. There were 1,093 crashes statewide where at least one driver used a handheld phone, with 11 people losing their lives in those crashes.

PennDOT uses 2010 figures on their website, probably since the last PA law was effective March 8, 2012 and 2010 was the most recent information available at that time.

National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) reported on November 24, 2015, that nationally, one in ten fatalities from vehicle crashes – 3,179 out of 32,675 in 2014 –were directly attributable to distracted driving. That report does not break down the data by state but it is reasonable to assume that PA had its share.

It gets worse.

An article appeared in the Times-Leader newspaper last Thursday March 29, 2018, reporting on research compiled by AAA Mid-Atlantic. It said that in 2016, there were 16,036 crashes in Pennsylvania where a distracted driver was a contributing factor. This was 12 percent of all PA accidents. There were 61 fatalities, or five percent of all fatalities were attributed to distracted drivers.

Use of electronic devices is increasing. Ask my three daughters. Are they using hand-held electronic devices more than 2010 or even 2016? The answer is absolutely yes but hopefully not while driving. My middle daughter used to text my wife while going to high school. When I challenged her on texting while driving – I used to lobby for the Driver Education teachers-- she calmly replied, “Dad, I wasn’t driving. I was sitting waiting for the train to pass by.”

Really? Every day?

Again from the AAA Mid-Atlantic report: 49 percent of all drivers talk on a hand-held device while driving and nearly 35 percent send texts or emails.

These statistics are chilling and make a strong case for House Bill 1684.

Distracted Driving is Greater than Electronic Devices

While the focus HB 1684 is on legislation effectively banning use of hand-held electronic devices used by the driver in most situations, the issue should be put in context. Distracted driving is a much larger issue than just cell phone use or texting while driving.

We have all been there.

- Someone applying makeup while driving.
- Someone eating while driving.
- Playing with dogs in the front seat.

I have even seen people reading hard copy newspapers while driving. On Sunday, I hope no one got into an accident because of the March Madness Loyola-Michigan game write-up in their local newspaper. That is human behavior. PA State Grange President Wayne Campbell would like to demonstrate an even larger issue – much larger than the purview of this committee – that causes drivers' attention to be pulled away from the road.

In addition to his lengthy service to the PA State Grange, Wayne was employed by General Motors Dealerships for almost thirty years. Much of that time was spent as a Service Manager. He has witnessed first-hand the complexities of the modern vehicle.

*** Comment from Wayne Campbell, President, PA State Grange

Takeaway Suggestions to Consider Standardization in Driver Controls

Personally, I can reinforce Wayne's observation. My 2014 car has cruise control near my right thumb – easy to use without distracting. My wife's 2012 car has the cruise control on the lower left of the steering column. This means that in her car, I have to physically look down to the left to set the car on cruise control and again to lock in the miles per hour. I know someone could say either to get a different car or just not to use cruise control. Of course, in reality, it is not that simple. When I last went shopping, did I as part of the buying process, look to see where the cruise control was located? Sadly, no.

My personal examples are with 2012 and 2014 vehicles. Maybe auto manufacturers have standardized these controls since then. Perhaps the House could research and consider a Resolution urging auto manufacturers to review driver instruments with an eye towards making sure the controls are conveniently accessible without taking the driver's attention away from the road. Certainly, the House would not be inclined to mandate manufacturer design nor would we advocate that but a Resolution certainly could remind them of the necessity to reexamine design.

Warning Tickets for Other Forms of Distracted Driving

We do offer this suggestion: Why not expand the reach of House Bill 1684 to include other forms of distracted driving where an officer MAY (not shall) pull a driver over if he or she is doing something that is clearly distracting such as applying makeup or reading the newspaper?

The language would say that the officer MAY write a warning ticket to send a message to the driver that his or her activities in the car can have an impact (pun intended) on others.

It would be at the officer's discretion for other forms of distracted driving as to whether or not a stop should be made. The officer would visually conclude that the driver was not fully engaged in driving. The officer would then have the discretion of issuing a verbal warning or a warning ticket. We believe that with a warning, most drivers would be scared enough to heed the warning, at least for a little while.

PA State Grange does not advocate penalties for other types of distracted driving since doing so leads into a whole different realm of "he said – she said" with a greater case load on local courts. In addition, having the penalties might lead some to accuse law enforcement of profiling, an unintended consequence no one would want.

Again, thank you for convening this hearing on House Bill 1684 and for giving the PA State Grange this opportunity to testify.