

Making Our Roads Safer

I'm the first to admit that I could do a better job keeping my eyes on the road and both hands on the wheel when I'm driving. I know I'm not alone. With our hectic schedules, many people are doing lots of other things while driving -- grabbing a quick meal, making phone calls, reading emails, sending text messages -- and the problem is only getting worse. It's time that Massachusetts follow the lead of many other states and make driving safety a higher priority.

According to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), being distracted while driving presents a serious and potentially deadly danger. In 2008, 5,870 people lost their lives and an estimated 515,000 people were injured in police-reported crashes in which at least one form of driver distraction was reported on the crash report. While these numbers are significant, they most likely understate the true size of the problem, since the identification of the distraction and its role in the crash by law enforcement can be difficult.

We should pursue a comprehensive approach to making our roads safer and reducing the number of traffic accidents and fatalities. There are a number of sensible steps we can take that balance public safety with cost and privacy concerns.

First, we should work to increase seat belt usage. Massachusetts has the lowest rate of seatbelt usage in the country, with only 74% of drivers regularly buckling up compared to the national average of 83%. The majority of people killed in car accidents are not wearing seat belts, and many of these lives could have been saved.

We could increase our seat belt usage by making a violation a primary enforcement. In primary belt law states, police officers can issue a citation for a seat belt violation alone. In secondary law states like Massachusetts, seat belt citations are allowed only after a driver is stopped for another violation. States with primary seat belt laws average about 13% higher seat belt use than states that have secondary laws.

Second, we should implement reasonable restrictions on the use of cell phones and electronic devices while driving. Studies have shown that the risk of a crash is 4 times higher when using a cell phone. Sending emails and text messages while driving is even more dangerous than talking on the phone. A study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute showed that texting is the most dangerous of all cell phone related activities, with a driver 23 times more likely to get into an accident if he texts while behind the wheel. This may be even more dangerous than driving while intoxicated.

Many states have already implemented laws to restrict the use of cell phones and electronic devices while driving:

- 19 states ban text messaging, and some others have partial bans

- 6 states prohibit drivers from talking on handheld cell phones (but allow hands-free usage)
- 21 states ban all cell phone use by novice drivers

Third, we need to improve our testing and license renewal procedures to ensure that all drivers, regardless of age, are able to continue to operate a motor vehicle safely. Most of the discussion to-date regarding this issue has been focused on elderly drivers, but the RMV should have a policy that addresses cognitive or physical impairments that can impact driving ability at any age. I believe we can do this in a cost-effective way that does not place undue burdens on either drivers or the RMV.

It is, of course, very difficult for someone to give up her drivers license and the independence that comes with it. Making this transition easier will require that we tackle the challenge of providing more public transportation options, particularly in suburban and rural communities.

I'm pleased that the state legislature's Transportation Committee has made improving driving safety a priority this legislative session. They have been consulting with many different groups and studying the experiences of other states. I look forward to soon debating and passing legislation that will improve driving safety in the Commonwealth.

I welcome your feedback on improving driving safety or any other issues. Please visit our website at www.RepJasonLewis.com. You can also reach me at 617 722-2060 or by email at Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us.

Author's Note: Priyanha Nadanasabesan, a student at Winchester High School, provided research assistance for this column.

Jason Lewis
State Representative
31st Middlesex District – Stoneham and Winchester