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"Saving Nevada's Teen Drivers"

Presented by the *Teenage Driver Public Forum Committee*

March 2003

Teen killed, four injured



**"Motor Vehicle Crashes are the Leading Cause of
Death for People 15 to 20 years old"**

John Phillips
Drive Friendly
(702) 243-3964

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Mission Statement

To research, develop, and recommend more effective methods to *prevent* teenage motor vehicle crashes.

Objectives

- I. Research the facts and problems contributing to teenage motor vehicle accidents.
- II. Examine current programs that address teenage driver preparation.
 - A. Nevada's Programs
 - B. Programs in other states
- III. Brainstorm more effective solutions.

The Issues

- ◆ Motor vehicle crashes are the number one cause of death for Nevada teens.
- ◆ 16 and 17-year-olds comprise 1.9 percent of Nevada drivers, but are involved in 7.2 percent of fatal crashes.
- ◆ 3/4 of teen passengers killed in crashes in Nevada were in cars driven by other teens.
- ◆ Teen crashes also kill drivers and passengers in other vehicles.
- ◆ Government funded studies show teens are particularly distracted by other teen passengers, not adult passengers.
- ◆ Teen passengers increase the risk of a fatal crash by 30 percent. Each additional teen passenger amplifies the risk.

Executive Summary

The 72nd Session of the Nevada Legislative will consider many bills dealing with operating a motor vehicle. Among these, will be bills pertaining to new teen drivers. While the Nevada Legislature is sometimes reluctant to pass laws that further restrict personal freedom, this year policy makers are more likely than ever to hear from constituents on the dangers facing both teen drivers and those with whom they share the road.

The number of vehicle-related deaths hit an all-time high in 2002, with 371 Nevadans losing their lives. This represents a 17.2 percent increase over 2001, according to Nevada's Office of Traffic Safety. The previous record was 361 in 1998.

In 2002, some horrific fatal crashes involving teens attracted intense media attention, particularly in Clark County. These crashes moved the community to take action to lower the teen crash rate. Unfortunately, the actions that need to be taken are not clearly outlined. The age-old belief that driver education *alone* will solve the problem has been proven time and again *not* to be successful.

Other action must be taken, along with assuring that driver education is provided in the best, most helpful way possible. The Teenage Driver Public Forum Committee discussed a number of options, which are presented in this report.

The Committee agreed, in general, that issues surrounding teen driving can be broken into the following four areas:

- ◆ Education
- ◆ Training
- ◆ Legislation
- ◆ Law Enforcement

Facts About Teen Drivers

- ◆ According to the National Transportation Safety Board, Nevada is one of 11 states voted as having the weakest graduated driver licensing program in the nation.
- ◆ Nevada ranks as one of the worst states in the nation with regard to its driver education programs. In Clark County there are 31 high schools and only 6 offer driver education classes. None offer a "behind the wheel" program and there are no future plans to establish such a program or even bring driver education classes back into the schools.
- ◆ Nevada is the fastest growing state in the nation with Clark County seeing the largest growth. Approximately 16,000 teens reach the age of 16 annually and many of these students are unprepared to drive on our streets and freeways.
- ◆ Southern Nevada has some of the worst driving hazards in the United States.
- ◆ There is not enough public funding allocated for "behind the wheel" training or for driver education programs.
- ◆ Driver education courses are not required for teenagers living in counties with populations less than 50,000 or cities with less than 25,000 people. In addition, if the public school they are enrolled in does not offer driver's education they are not required to take it.
- ◆ The crash rate per mile for drivers between the ages of 15 and 20 is four times that of adult drivers.
- ◆ Research into fatal teen crashes during the 1990s found that the greatest danger times are after school, and at the beginning and end of each school year.
- ◆ Teenagers think they are invincible.
- ◆ Young drivers who drink are involved in fatal crashes at twice the rate of drivers who are 21 and over.

- ◆ Nevada law requires that new teen drivers receive 30 hours of classroom education in an approved driving course. If the course is offered via the Internet, television or some other means, the course must have a specific state license to assure the students are meeting driver education requirements.
- ◆ A bill being introduced by Senator Barbara Cegavske seeks to revise the current provision that states one hour of "behind the wheel" training is equal to three hours of classroom time.
- ◆ The Committee believes that television and Internet-based programs are not as successful as the classroom format for imparting the necessary information. While the Committee felt that driver education programs cannot reduce the teen crash rate alone, it provides an important foundation from which to build driving experience and practice.
- ◆ The 2001 Legislature took action to allow 15-year-olds to take a driver education course, regardless of their year in school, which has been one positive change.
- ◆ Behind the wheel training with professional Driving Instructors materially enhances the reduction in teen crash rates, but few Nevada teens are receiving professional training. Most programs have limited time and resources to offer new drivers what they need to know in preparation for the dangers of the road. Private driving school and training programs are available and provide a valuable service in mediating this huge problem. The state has not clearly recognized the importance of this component in preparing new drivers.
- ◆ Currently, teens are required to complete a minimum of 50 hours of "behind the wheel" experience with a driver that is at least 21 years old and has been driving for at least one year. The teen's parent or guardian must sign an affidavit to this effect; however, the Committee felt this is too often submitted falsely.

Committee's Recommendations:

1. Support and strengthen our graduated driver licensing program.
2. Strengthen current driver education requirements.
3. Require mandatory "behind the wheel" training.
4. The Teenage Driver Public Forum Committee should meet with the Clark County School Board to discuss increased involvement in driver education and training programs.
5. Encourage parents to start a "layaway savings plan" for their child's driver education. Driving is a privilege --- not a right.
6. Request that insurance companies create a fund for driver education training.
7. Obtain more government grants to support teen driver education programs.
8. Require more adverse consequences or penalties for teens that are convicted of either drug or alcohol offenses or for traffic violations. These consequences could include community service or assignment to treatment programs. This would serve as an incentive to acquire safe driving practices.
9. Gross misdemeanor and felony convictions should not be reduced to misdemeanors by the judicial system. There is currently too much leniency.
10. Return the minimum age requirement to 16 to obtain a drivers license.
11. Teens must maintain a learners permit for 6 months prior to obtaining a drivers license.
12. Make it mandatory that a teenage drivers education 30-hour course be completed prior to a teen obtaining a one-year instruction permit.
13. The DMV affidavit is a legal document that parents of teens must sign. It should be formulated into a form/checklist log, whereby, the licensed driver certifies under penalty of perjury that the hours logged are accurate. It would include: the start/stop time, the conditions such as day or night, wet or dry road surface, freeway vs. surface street, light traffic/heavy traffic, etc. The parent does not have to be the actual *behind the wheel* trainer.

Related Recommendations

- 1.) Implement mandatory, primary seat belt laws in 2003.
- 2.) Lower the blood alcohol level from .10 to .08.
- 3.) Pass a mandatory annual vehicle safety inspections law.
- 4.) Post bulletin boards in all high schools with driver education information.
- 5.) Suggest all high schools have an "Annual Driver Safety Awareness" program taught by law enforcement agencies for teenagers 15-17 years old.
- 6.) Review/update standardization of the DMV's "Behind The Wheel" road test.
- 7.) Traffic awareness and general public safety should be taught in grades K-12. Jaywalking and riding bicycles on the wrong side of the road are prime examples. Respect for the rules of the road should be established long before the initiation of driver training as 15 years of age is too late to start the process.

Conclusion

Teenagers operating motor vehicles have become a way of life. Nevada's current rules and requirements for teen drivers do not adequately address the unique concerns associated with teens obtaining a drivers license. The Teenage Driver Public Forum Committee's proposal addresses the areas of education, training, legislation and law enforcement. The Committee's recommendations simplifies procedures, facilitates, understanding and provides police with a viable tool for enforcement. The proposals are cost-effective and address current procedure shortfalls through a combination of driver education and training. The Committee respectfully submits these recommendations for consideration, review and implementation as soon as possible by respective agencies affected.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation and special thanks to the members of the Teenage Drivers Public Forum Committee whom are listed below:

1. Erin Breen UNLV Safe Community Partnership
2. Ted Carry City Of Las Vegas Traffic & Parking Commission
(CAG) Regional Transportation Commission
3. Barbara K. Cegavske Nevada State Senator, District 8
4. Cathy Dillwith Professional Driving Academy
5. Lisa Foster AAA
6. Sandy Heverly STOP DUI
7. Kanice A. Jones Driver Education Instructor(Former DMV Examiner)
8. Brian Lacy Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles
9. Serene Lindsay Witness to May 9, 2002 LVHS Accident
10. Kevin R. Malone Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles
11. Jim Olschlager Nevada Highway Patrol
12. Jeff Payne Drivers Edge
13. Mike Wiltse Nevada Highway Patrol
14. Serene Wright Concerned Parent

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4. Nevada Office of Traffic Safety
5. Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles