

Dear Editor:

I've witnessed this scene countless times in my 25 years as an emergency physician: a teen driver hurts or kills someone because of a totally preventable distraction.

One such case that comes to mind is a teenage girl who drove her car off the road while trying to pick up a cell phone that she had dropped. She suffered severe extremity and facial injuries, including the loss of an eye. In another incident, a Pennsylvania teen ran through a stop sign, distracted by a conversation he was having with his teenage passengers, and struck a minivan, killing a mother and her two young children.

These are cautionary tales for drivers of all ages. But studies show that teenager drivers run an even greater risk. One such study by the U.S. Department of Transportation says the crash rate for 16-year-old drivers is 15 times that of 20 to 24 year olds.

That's why I urge the Pennsylvania Senate to take up two proposed bills that would amend the Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) law.

House Bill 67, one of the two bills currently before the Senate to improve safety among teen drivers, is called "Lacey's Law" in memory of Lacey Gallagher. Lacey was an 18-year-old Philadelphia high school student who died in April 2007 after her vehicle hit a cement barrier while driving with six other teenage passengers on the way to a post-prom party.

House Bill 67 would establish passenger restrictions for those younger than 18, hold teen drivers responsible for making sure all occupants younger than 18 use seat belts, and ban the use of cell phones and texting.

To reinforce the provisions in House Bill 67, House Bill 2070 would ban the use of cell phones (except hands free) and texting while operating a vehicle. This ban would apply it to everyone who drives the highways of the Commonwealth.

With the high school prom season in full swing, it is time to act and adopt these lifesaving components. Strengthening Pennsylvania's Graduated Driver Licensing by adopting House Bill 67 and House Bill 2070 would greatly reduce driving distractions by teens and go a long way toward preventing teen driver crashes – and reserving prom season as a time of happy memories.

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