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State politicians need to reconcile differences to best protect young drivers

Have you ever thought about how much time a teenager spends on their phone? Most likely, an unlimited billing plan makes this fact too easy to ignore. In case you were curious, about 4 out of 5 teenagers own a cell phone, and on an average day, a typical teen sends nearly 80 texts. When do they find the time – during school, during family time, while driving?

Most parents can laugh and dismiss the hours of time spent on a cell phone as a teenage prerogative. Unfortunately, some parents have had to endure seeing their child be injured or worse in an accident caused by cell phone use while driving. While we may not be able to do anything about the increasing popularity of wireless communication among teenagers, the Pennsylvania General Assembly can ensure that they are safe and not using their phone while driving.

Motor vehicle crashes continue to be the leading cause of death for teen drivers. An adolescent simply does not have the years of driving experience and knowledge under their belt that an older driver has, and this does impact their ability to perform many of the complex tasks associated with driving. Using a wireless device further hampers their ability to detect and respond to hazards and effectively control their vehicle.

To address these areas of concern and to upgrade our Graduated Driver Licensing Law, the House passed Representative Joseph Markosek's bill (HB 67) that would increase the practical driving experience for a learner's permit, limit the number of teenage passengers, prohibit interactive wireless communication devices except in case of emergency, and most importantly, enforce junior driver wireless use as a primary offense violation. The Senate recently amended Representative Markosek's bill and passed a much weaker version that allowed for the use of wireless systems integrated into the vehicle, increased the number of passengers allowed, removed the increased driving hours requirement, and most importantly, changed the wireless violation to a secondary offense. Wireless use violations as a primary offense is critical to the success and safety of this bill!

Now the bill sits, waiting on some sort of resolution between the two chambers. House and Senate members need to get together, reconcile the differences, and work out a compromise that best protects our young drivers. If our Senators and Representatives need to decide between protecting the lives of teenagers across the state, or quickly passing a weak and compromised bill that inadequately addresses restrictions on junior drivers ... the choice should be obvious.

The Pennsylvania Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics; the Pennsylvania Chapter, American College of Emergency Physicians; and the Pennsylvania Medical Society all agree, it's time for Pennsylvania to join the ranks of states that have better ensured the safety and future of their young drivers. They need to pass a meaningful and comprehensive bill that can save lives today!

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