



February 17, 2021
House Finance Committee
House Bill 74- Proponent Testimony

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the Ohio House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 74. My name is Melissa Wheeler and I am the Senior Government Relations Director for Westfield. Founded in 1848, Westfield is one of the largest non-public companies in Ohio and the largest employer in Medina County. We provide property and casualty insurance products in 21 states and surety products in 50 states through a network of more than a thousand leading independent insurance agencies.

Roadway fatalities are on the rise despite the fact that vehicles are getting safer. The number of crashes continue to rise, in part, because more people have smartphones and increasingly use them while driving. Distracted driving increases not only crash frequency but equally importantly, it increases bodily injury severity.

Mobile devices are more dangerous than traditional distractions. Manual, visual and cognitive distractions are all part of the epidemic of distracted driving. Multiple studies show that distracted driving significantly increases the risk of a crash. Distracted driving continues to be a danger to everyone using the road, and not just the person sending or receiving the text.

Ohio is one of only four states without primary enforcement of distracted driving laws. The “Hands-Free Ohio” language included in Governor DeWine’s transportation budget proposal would make driving while handling any electronic wireless device a primary offense. It would prohibit drivers from texting, emailing, watching or recording video, surfing the internet, and engaging in other activities that require physically holding a phone or wireless device. At the same time, it would still allow drivers to use voice commands or single-touch activation to make calls, text, use GPS or listen to music on mobile devices--- and would allow exceptions for emergency calls.

More than 20 states have passed similar hands-free laws, and those states saw reductions in traffic deaths. Of the 14 states that enacted these laws before 2018, 11 saw a decrease in their traffic fatality rates within two years after passing and enforcing new laws, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Westfield is a member of the Fix Our Roads Ohio (FOR Ohio) coalition. FOR Ohio is a group of diverse stakeholders united in support of Ohio’s transportation future. FOR Ohio strongly supports the “Hands-Free Ohio” provisions of House Bill 74 designed to strengthen Ohio’s distracted driving laws.

Now is the time to act because tragically, traffic crashes and deaths continue to grow in Ohio. It's time for the Ohio Legislature to modernize Ohio's texting law to require "hands-free" use, prohibiting drivers from having physical contact with their phones or other wireless devices while driving or stopped within a traffic lane.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony.