BEFORE THE SENATE LOCAL GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC SAFETY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

TESTIMONY ON HOUSE BILL 95

SEPTEMBER 19, 2017

Chairman Uecker, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the committee; I am Kimberly Schwind, Senior Public Relations Manager at AAA Ohio Auto Club and am here today representing the Ohio Conference of AAA Clubs. The Ohio Conference is composed of the six AAA Clubs in Ohio, and represents over 2 million Ohioans, all constituents of yours.

AAA has been very involved with, and active in activities, legislation and studies dealing with distracted driving. We have been at the forefront of many issues including Ohio’s current ban on texting. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has conducted numerous polls and studies on this distracted driving issue. Sadly, there is no one “magic bullet” to stop the carnage on our highways that is caused by this distracted driving epidemic.

The largest percentage of crashes involving distracted driving has to do with what is recognized as “cognitive distractions”. This phrase means that doing specific activities while driving takes the drivers mind off the task of driving.

It is not so much holding a phone or changing radio stations, or taking one’s hand off the wheel. It is the fact that when one is texting, talking, whether hands free or not, checking and reading emails, or checking traffic on a bluetooth device, the mind is not engaged in driving safely. What’s scary, is the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found these cognitive distractions can last up to 27 seconds after a task is completed!

This legislation is helpful in that it does penalize drivers who commit a moving violation as a result of what the bill defines as distracted driving. It specifies certain uses of handheld communications devices, but does provide a long list of exceptions. It is in effect, secondary enforcement of distracted driving.

According to our most recent information:

* 47 states have texting bans for all drivers
* 15 states have handheld bans for all drivers at all times
* Nearly all states (49) prohibit some form of distracted driving for teen drivers.

However, state legislators are continuing to grapple with how to keep their laws current with the advent of new technology that is being added to vehicles today.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) 32,166 fatal crashes, involving 48,613 drivers took place in the U. S. during 2015. These crashes killed 35,092 people. 3,196 of those fatal crashes involved distraction – or 10% of all fatal crashes.

However, these statistics almost certainly underestimate the role of distraction in fatal crashes. NHTSA data relies on police crash reports, which aren’t a reliable way to count cellphone-related collisions, because drivers often don’t volunteer that they were on the phone and there is usually a lack of other evidence to determine drivers’ phone use. Other sources report as many as 26 percent of motor vehicle crashes involve a distracted driver, and some in-depth studies suggest that the true percentage of crashes involving some form of driver distraction (including but not limited to use of electronics) may even be in excess of 50 percent. In fact, a AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety study found that nearly 6 out of 10 *teen* crashes involve distraction.

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety also found that driver interactions with voice- activated speech-to-text systems in new vehicles are a source of high levels of cognitive distraction— some speech-to-text systems ranked 4 on a 5-point cognitive distraction scale.

And what of public opinion?

According to the AAA Foundation’s latest Traffic Safety Culture Index:

81% of drivers view texting or emailing while driving as a very serious threat to their own personal safety and 78.2% consider it completely unacceptable.

However, nearly 1 in 3 (31.4%) admit to typing or sending a text message or email while driving in the past month, and 2 in 5 (40.2%) report reading a text message or email while driving in the past month.

When it comes to texting or emailing while driving, a “do as I say, not as I do” mentality remains among the motoring public – and it’s actually getting worse!

Cell phone use while driving is even more widespread. More than 2 in 3 drivers report talking on their cell phone while driving in the past month, and nearly 1 in 3 say they do so fairly often or regularly.

While, there is a stronger disapproval toward using a hand-held cell phone while driving (70.4%). People are more accepting of hands-free cell phone use than handheld (65.9% vs. 28.6%).

Therein lies a problem. As I mentioned earlier, hands-free or integrated systems are still cognitively distracting – Hands-free, is not risk free!

We at AAA believe that anything we can do to eliminate the activities that cause distracted driving **is a good first step.** That’s why we are supportive of this bill. However, it will not completely solve the problem. We do have concerns with how our law enforcement personnel can use the law effectively to cite motorists for distracted driving. We will let them speak for themselves on this.

AAA supports a comprehensive approach to addressing distracted driving and believes any legislative or administrative proposal to address distracted driving should be based on sound research and/or fundamental safety principles and include a significant education effort. We also believe that text messaging, emailing, or other manual manipulations of portable wireless devices for electronic data communication while driving should be made illegal.

Thank you Mr. Chairman for hearing from AAA. I will attempt to answer any questions you and your committee may have.