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Getting tough saves teens

TUCSON, Ariz. -- As Illinois lawmakers prepare to debate a proposal that would make the state's teen driver-licensing system one of the nation's most stringent, top researchers say such laws are saving young lives in states where they have been enacted, but much remains to be done.

Placing restrictions on teen licenses "is clearly the best policy intervention we have so far to reduce teen-driving deaths," said Daniel Keating, who studies adolescent development and the teen brain at the University of Michigan. "It has the biggest bang for the buck."

Teens at the wheel

Every state has some component of Graduated Driver Licensing, or GDL, but the rules vary greatly, creating a patchwork of systems with varying restrictions. In states with the most limitations, researchers say, fatality rates have declined in recent years.

"If you have a cancer cure, don't you think everyone would want it?" Keating asked more than 100 experts who gathered here this week to share the latest research on the teen-driving problem, which bolsters the case for more stringent GDL laws.

The real possibility for change is on the table this year in Illinois, following a legislative proposal recently unveiled by Secretary of State Jesse White. The proposed changes were partly in response to the Tribune's yearlong "Teens at the Wheel" series, which examined causes and possible solutions that could reduce teen-driving fatalities, the No. 1 killer of American teens.

The Illinois debate starts during a particularly deadly period in the six-county Chicago area. Already this year, at least 10 area teens have been killed, well ahead of the pace set in 2006, when at least 59 died as a result of vehicle crashes.

Success in other states

In other states, experience shows upgrades to GDL laws have often been slowed by perceived opposition from parents who feel they are too busy to conduct additional practice driving with their teens and want to be relieved of chauffeur duties.

For that and other reasons, many states have failed to enact GDL laws that have all of the provisions experts consider most effective in reducing deaths. Only about half scored

"good" for GDL laws in recent ratings by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Several researchers at the conference offered high praise for the Illinois proposal.

"Everything that is proposed makes good sense," said Allan Williams, a retired chief scientist for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "It will be a good law and will be one of the better ones in the country."

Effective GDL systems, Williams and other experts said, call for lengthy adult-supervised practice, restrictions on night driving and limits on the number of teen passengers. The combination gives teen drivers vital but safe experience and greatly reduces their exposure to more dangerous risks.

That need was repeatedly mentioned at the gathering, which brought together the nation's top teen-driving researchers from universities, non-profits and state and federal agencies for the first time since 2002. The Itasca-based National Safety Council organized the session and attracted representatives from 21 states, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands. The three-day meeting concluded on Wednesday.

Among the GDL enhancements in White's proposal is a provision that would triple the length of time teens must hold a learner's permit, from three months to nine months. That would put Illinois ahead of most, since 38 states require six months, researchers said.

"We have a lot of room for growth," Williams said of GDL enhancements. "We should be optimizing night and passenger restrictions."

Cullerton's support

White's proposal, which has the backing of Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago), a longtime supporter of highway-safety bills in Illinois, would also make young drivers wait longer before being allowed to transport unrelated teen passengers. They are now allowed to have only one such passenger for their first six months of driving, but that would be extended to a year.

Such restrictions are especially helpful in reducing fatalities, according to David Preusser, who runs his own research group and presented data on changes in fatal crashes since GDL laws were first enacted in some states in the mid-1990s. Crash risk doubles for 16-year-olds when they have a passenger of any age, he said, and it doubles again if there are multiple teen passengers.

"Teens are very, very distracted by other teenagers," said Bruce Simons-Morton, who studied teen drivers leaving high school parking lots as part of his work at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. "Having a carload of guys is certainly the worst combination."

Although there would be exemptions for teens traveling to school-sponsored activities

and work, one of the Illinois proposals expected to be among the most controversial is a prohibition on newly licensed teens driving after 10 p.m. on weekdays and 11 p.m. on weekends, an hour earlier than currently.

Conference participants, however, repeatedly pointed to studies that show teen fatalities have been reduced by such limits. Between 1995 and 2005, Preusser said, the involvement of 16-year-olds in fatal crashes dropped 28 percent nationally between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m., as nighttime driving restrictions were created in many states.

White's proposal also would require teens to get six hours of behind-the-wheel training from a certified driving instructor. In its series, the Tribune reported that some driver's education courses gave students less than two hours of behind-the-wheel instruction. The importance of driver education was generally downplayed at the conference, because most research shows it does not have a direct impact on reducing teen-crash rates.

As part of the conference, the National Safety Council recognized the Tribune with an award for its teen-driving coverage in 2006. Paulette Moulous, the group's executive vice president, said the series had "awakened teenagers, families, educators and legislators throughout Illinois to the need for action."

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