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NEWS

ROD R. BLAGOJEVICH - GOVERNOR

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CONTACTS:

Cheryle Jackson 312/814.3158

Abby Ottenhoff 312/814.3158

Rebecca Rausch 217/782.7355

Gerardo Cardenas 312/814.3158

Mike Claffey (IDOT) 312/814.3957

Matt Vanover (IDOT) 217/558.0517

Gov. Blagojevich signs laws to protect teenage drivers and their passengers

Illinois bans cell phone use by drivers under 18

SPRINGFIELD - On the heels of releasing new statistics showing that Illinois is on pace to witness the lowest number of traffic fatalities in over 80 years, Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich today signed several new laws focused on teenage drivers. One new law bans drivers under the age of 18 from using cell phones. A second law requires drivers under 18 to make sure that their teen passengers are properly buckled up in the front and back seats. Traffic crashes are the leading cause of teenage fatalities – and teenage drivers have a fatality rate that is nearly two times higher than older drivers. Illinois joins a handful of states that restrict teenagers from using cell phones while driving.

“We know that cell phones can be distracting. And most of us remember how distracting it can be just to be a teenager. On the roads, that combination can be especially dangerous, which is why it’s important to enact legislation that prohibits teenagers from using their cell phones while driving,” said Gov. Blagojevich.

These steps to protect teen drivers come one day after the Governor announced that Illinois’ safety belt use is at an all time high. The Illinois Department of Transportation reports that 86% of drivers observed are wearing their seatbelts, up ten percent from two years ago. At the same time, 2005 could record the fewest number of persons killed on our highways since 1924. 41 fewer people have lost their lives on Illinois highways than the same time last year.

Senate Bill 210, sponsored by Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago) and Rep. Paul Froehlich (R-Schaumburg), bans cell phone use by drivers under 18 - except in an emergency. According to the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, Maryland, Maine, Connecticut, Tennessee, New

Jersey, Colorado, Delaware, the District of Columbia and now Illinois, ban cell phone use for teenage drivers.

"Teenage drivers who have just received their driver's license already face a number of challenges. They don't need the added distraction of cell phone conversations diverting their attention from the road," said Sen. Cullerton.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), two out of five deaths among U.S. teens are the result of a motor vehicle crash. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that, per mile driven, teen drivers ages 16 to 19 are four times more likely to crash than older drivers.

"Learning to drive safely and complying with the rules of the road is hard enough for teenagers and there is no good reason why inexperienced drivers should be distracted by making and receiving phone calls," said Rep. Froehlich.

Senate Bill 229, sponsored by Sen. Cullerton and Rep. Deborah Graham (D-Oak Park), requires drivers under 18 to make sure that their passengers under 19 are wearing seat belts in the front and back seats. According to the CDC, compared with other age groups, teens have the lowest rate of seat belt use. In 2003, 18% of high school students reported they rarely or never wear seat belts when riding with someone else.

"I am very pleased that we are taking this step to protect our young people from deaths and serious injuries that could be averted by the simple precaution of buckling up," said Rep. Graham.

Also today, the Governor signed House Bill 1565, a measure that brings all sections of the vehicle code into compliance with the age requirements in Illinois Child Passenger Protection Act, which requires that children up to age eight must be transported in a proper child safety restraint. HB 1565 was sponsored by Rep. Cynthia Soto (D-Chicago) and Senators Antonio Munoz (D-Chicago) and Iris Y. Martinez (D-Chicago).

SB 229 and HB 1565 become effective January 1, 2006.

"As we move forward with our attempts to protect child passengers and raise awareness about the higher age limit in the Child Passenger Protection Act, it is important that all relevant sections of state law are in agreement," Rep. Soto said.

In 2004, the number of teen deaths on Illinois roadways dropped to its lowest rate since 1974. The Governor, the Illinois State Police and Illinois Department of Transportation credited increased enforcement efforts during 2004 for helping to reduce the number of teens, ages 15 – 19, killed in motor vehicle crashes. Preliminary 2004 fatality figures provided by the Illinois Department of Transportation indicate 133 teens were killed last year, the lowest rate since collection of teen fatality statistics began in 1974. In 2003, 187 teens lost their lives on Illinois roadways and 190 were killed in 2002.

The Governor has made a reduction in auto fatalities one of his priorities and set an ambitious goal for his administration of reducing fatalities in Illinois to 1,000 or fewer by 2008. Previous traffic safety measures signed by the Governor include:

- Banning teen drivers from carrying more than one passenger for the first six months after receiving his or her license
- Signing the primary seat belt enforcement law that allows officers to stop and ticket drivers for not wearing a seat belt
- Increasing the age at which children must be in booster seats from 4 to 8.

Officials at the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) credit these measures with helping reduce the number of fatalities. So far in 2005, 597 people have been killed on Illinois roads through the first six months – 41 fewer people than were killed during the same period in 2004.

At the same time, seatbelt use hit a new record – growing ten percent since Gov. Blagojevich signed the primary seatbelt enforcement law. Before primary enforcement became law, police could not pull you over based solely on a seatbelt violation and usage was at 76%. Since Governor Blagojevich signed the bill into law safety belt usage climbed to 83% in June of 2004 and 86% in June of 2005.

“We’ve certainly made progress in terms of reducing fatalities and encouraging greater seat belt use,” said IDOT Secretary Timothy W. Martin. “But we’ve still got more work to do. These measures signed by the Governor should help save more lives.”