



ADVOCATES
FOR HIGHWAY
& AUTO SAFETY

March 22, 2021

The Honorable Bill Rabon, Chair
Committee on Rules and Operations of the Senate
North Carolina General Assembly
16 West Jones Street
Raleigh, North Carolina 27601

Dear Chairperson Rabon:

Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (Advocates), an alliance of consumer, safety, medical, public health and law enforcement groups, and insurance companies working together to pass highway and auto safety laws that prevent crashes, save lives, reduce injuries, and curb costs, urges you to support Senate Bill (SB) 20. This legislation will improve safety on North Carolina roads by broadening the current prohibition on drivers from using wireless communication devices to read, write or send text messages while operating a motor vehicle to include distracting viewing of non-navigational content and manual use. Considering the prevalence of distracted driving crashes, this legislation is critical, responsive and timely.

In 2019, there were 1,373 traffic fatalities on North Carolina roads according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Wireless communication device distraction, which includes manual, visual and cognitive components, is a serious issue contributing to crashes and deaths. According to the NHTSA, the percentage of drivers visibly manipulating hand-held devices while driving increased by 250 percent between 2009 and 2016. The NHTSA survey, *National Telephone Survey on Distracted Driving Attitudes and Behaviors – 2015*, noted that twice as many respondents admitted to talking on a cell phone or texting when they were involved in a crash or a near crash in 2015 as compared to 2010. Additionally, a survey performed by Nationwide Insurance found four out of ten respondents claimed to have been hit or nearly hit due to a distracted driver. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) released a roadside survey in 2019 that found manipulation of devices while driving is up 57 percent over the prior 2014 survey while handheld use decreased.ⁱ More can and should be done to eradicate driver distraction.

As wireless communication technology has developed from cellphones to smart phones, and the range of electronic communication platforms has significantly broadened to include apps, cameras, social media, gaming, etc., laws curbing driver distraction must be updated to keep pace with the technology and ensuing distraction. A 2016 survey conducted by State Farm found that accessing the internet, reading and updating social media networks on a cell phone while driving more than doubled from 2009 to 2016, and about 10 percent of those surveyed in 2016 were also playing games on a cell phone while driving.ⁱⁱ Provisions in SB 20 to restrict use of the device for “watching a video or movie or communicating by video” whether the device is handheld or dash mounted will help to curb visual distraction, as restrictions on handheld use and entering information into a dash mounted device will curb manual distraction.

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that the use of devices while driving can result in mental distractions that can persist for up to 27 seconds after returning to the driving task.ⁱⁱⁱ According to research on driver cognitive distraction compiled by IIHS,^{iv} “researchers have found that brain activity associated with visual processing and attention is suppressed when drivers are cognitively distracted ([Bowyer et al., 2009](#); [Strayer et al., 2006](#); [Just et al., 2008](#)).” As a result, “cognitive distractions can lead to so-called ‘inattention blindness’ in which drivers fail to comprehend or process information from objects in the roadway even when they are looking at them ([Strayer et al., 2003](#)).” Limitations on handheld and hands-free device use provided in SB 20 will help prevent drivers from taking their eyes off the road and their mind off

the task of driving, while continuing to ensure that more extensive prohibitions on use are required for novice teen drivers.

Distracted driving not only results in crashes, deaths and injuries, but it also unnecessarily expends taxpayer dollars. Nationally, crashes in which at least one driver was identified as being distracted cost \$40 billion annually (NHTSA). Adjusted for inflation only, that amounts to \$48 billion in 2021 dollars. Distracted driver crashes cost businesses \$8.2 billion in 2013 (Network of Employers for Traffic Safety, 2016). The annual economic costs of all crashes in North Carolina are nearly \$8 billion (NHTSA).

Each distracted driving death and serious injury irrevocably changes the lives of families and communities in North Carolina and across the nation. We urge you to support SB 20, a critical measure to curb dangerous and deadly distracted driving.

Sincerely,



Catherine Chase
President

cc: Committee on Rules and Operations of the Senate Members

ⁱ IIHS, *Driver cellphone interactions increase 57 percent*, January 24, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Texting While Driving Includes Growing Mobile Web Use, <https://www.statefarm.com/simple-insights/auto-and-vehicles/distracted-driving-includes-growing-mobile-web-use>.

ⁱⁱⁱ AAA Newsroom, *New Hands-free Technologies Pose Hidden Dangers for Drivers*, October 22, 2015.

^{iv} IIHS HLDI, Topics, Distracted Driving, available here: <https://www.iihs.org/topics/distracted-driving>.