DISTRACTED DRIVING

Issue

Distracted driving is a major contributor to motor vehicle crashes, deaths and injuries on our roads. The use of electronic devices for communications (such as text messaging and video calls) and entertainment (such as apps and video streaming) can readily distract drivers from the driving task as found by safety research, studies and data.

Impact

In 2023, 3,275 people were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver according to NHTSA, accounting for 8% of all crash fatalities. Nonoccupants (pedestrians, pedalcyclists, and others) accounted for almost 19% (611) of distraction-affected fatalities in 2023.

Solutions

Laws, Technology and Roadway Safety Infrastructure

Comprehensive State Laws to Deter Distracted Driving

Safety Technologies and Improved Safety Standards Can Protect Vehicle Occupants and Other Road Users

- Proven collision avoidance systems in vehicles including AEB, LDW/LKA, BSD with intervention, rear AEB and rear-cross traffic alert should be required.
- Driver monitoring systems (DMS), also referred to as driver support systems among other names, for passenger motor vehicles can help to prevent and/or mitigate crashes caused by impairment, fatigue, distraction, driver disengagement, automation complacency and the foreseeable misuse of partial driver automation systems.

Road Safety Infrastructure Improvements and the SSA

DISTRACTED DRIVING

The Facts

- Crashes in which at least one driver was identified as being distracted imposed an economic cost of $98.2 billion in 2019. Updated for inflation alone, in 2025, the economic cost would be nearly $124 billion.
- According to a report from the NETS that used incident data from 2018, distracted driving crashes cost employers nearly $19 billion in 2019 dollars. Updated for inflation alone, in 2025, the economic cost would be $23.98 billion.
- The true impact of distracted driving remains unclear due to issues with the underreporting of crashes involving distraction, including differences in police crash report coding and database limitations.
- Crash risk increases dramatically–as much as four times higher–when a driver is using a mobile phone, with no significant safety difference between handheld and hands-free phone use observed in many studies.
- Sending or receiving a text message causes the driver's eyes to be off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds. When driving 55 mph, this is the equivalent of driving the entire length of a football field with your eyes closed.
- According to NHTSA, the percentage of drivers visibly manipulating handheld devices while driving increased by 36.4% between 2014 and 2023.
- A February 2022 survey commissioned by State Farm found that among licensed drivers:
  - 55% "always" or "often" read or send text messages while driving.
  - 51% "always" or "often" hold the phone while talking.
  - 49% "always" or "often" interact with cell phone apps.
- A March 2022 survey commissioned by Advocates and Selective Insurance Group found:
  - 70% of licensed drivers have used a mobile device while driving for personal reasons in the last 90 days.
  - Nearly one in three Americans (31%) have either been in or know someone who has been in a crash that occurred while a driver was using a mobile device.
  - More than half of Americans have seen people driving while distracted by a mobile device in the past two weeks (56%).
  - When asked about strategies to effectively reduce distracted driving or its impacts, 58% indicated advanced safety technologies and 50% affirmed comprehensive state laws.

South Carolina Grandmother and Nurse Adopts Title of Safety Advocate to Honor Late Husband

A Nurse on a Mission

June 29, 2017, seemed like an ordinary summer day. Kelly Willenberg's husband, Dale Willenberg, a nurse like Kelly, left home and biked to work at the hospital as he normally did. Dale always used a helmet, headlights and rode in bike lanes to maximize safety, but that day, a distracted driver veered into the bike lane and struck him without warning. Sadly, Dale passed away the next day in the same hospital where he worked. The driver did not have a license or insurance but did have numerous prior moving violations and fled the scene. Eventually, he turned himself into the police. He later plead guilty to a hit-and-run with a death and is currently serving a lengthy jail sentence.

By January 2018, Kelly had turned her tragedy into advocacy. While helping to care for a new grandchild with a congenital heart condition in Boston, Massachusetts, she also partnered with State Representative Bill Taylor (R) and the Palmetto Cycling Coalition to try to pass distracted driving prevention legislation in South Carolina. She testified at several hearings that year and helped finance the publicity campaign.

Despite a lack of progress, Kelly and her safety partners refused to give up, even in sessions when legislators opted not to even schedule a hearing on the pending bill. After nearly eight years of persistence and the driving force of Rep. Taylor, the South Carolina Hands-Free and Distracted Driving Act was passed in May of 2025 and took effect in September of the same year.

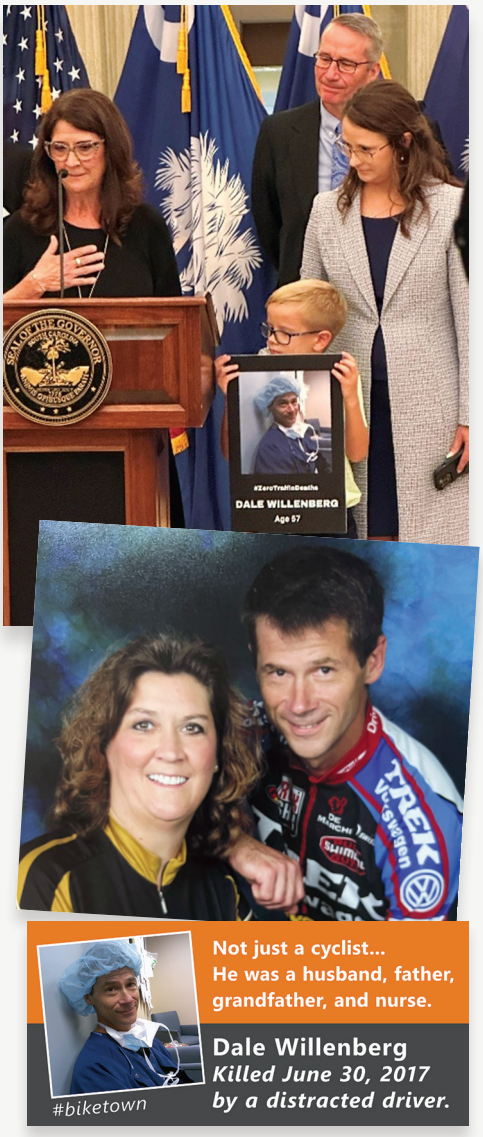
Looking to 2026

Kelly will be continuing her advocacy and interest in other traffic safety issues in South Carolina, including promoting ISA legislation to stop super speeders and improving training and education for young and novice drivers. Advocates is excited to engage on new safety measures with Kelly as they are introduced in South Carolina.

South Carolina Daily Gazette

"SC's new hands-free driving law goes into effect Sept. 1"

7/31/25



Top: Kelly Willenberg, with her daughter Mariel Norton, and grandson, Dale Norton, at the ceremonial bill signing on July 31, 2025.

Center: Kelly and her late husband, Dale.

Bottom: Memorial poster for Dale.

DISTRACTED DRIVING

The Solutions - Laws Rating Chart and Map

GOOD

State has both optimal laws
— **26 states plus DC**

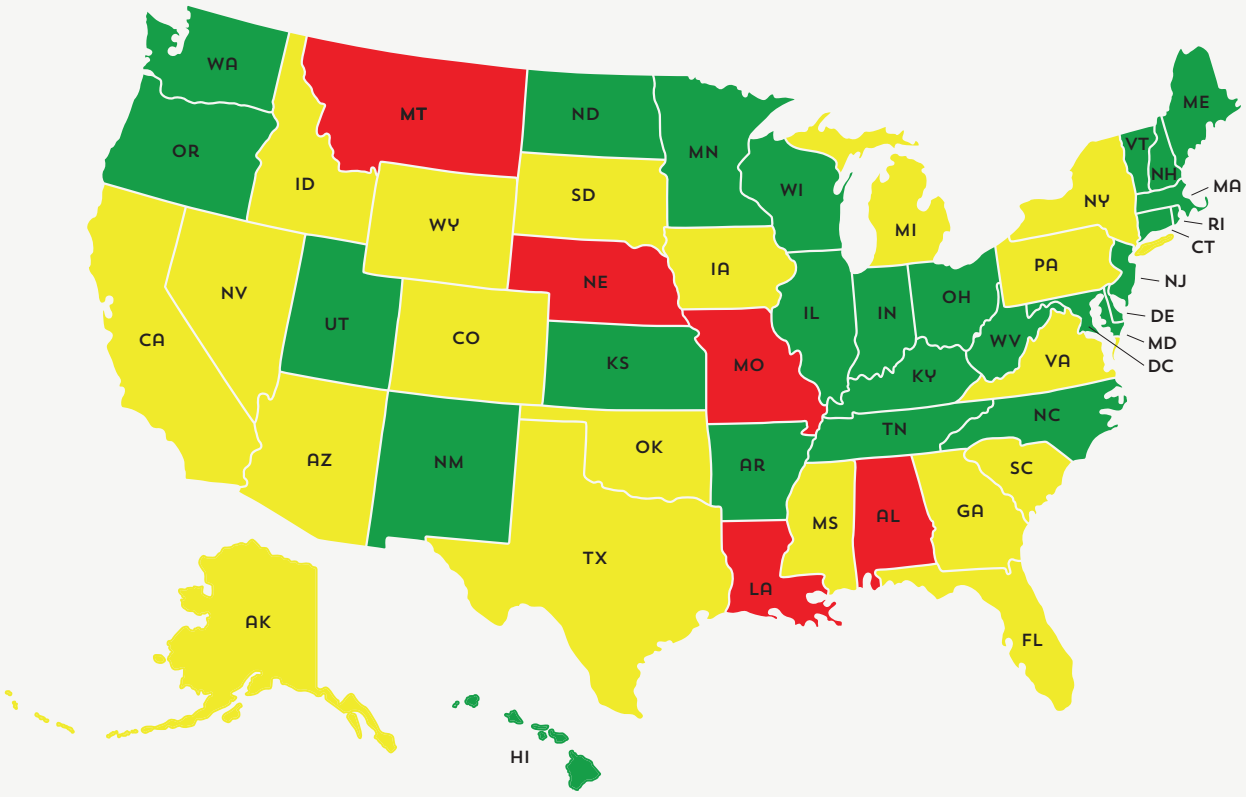
CAUTION

State has one optimal law
— **19 states**

DANGER

State has zero optimal laws
— **5 states**

● Optimal law adopted

	Alabama	Alaska	Arizona	Arkansas	California	Colorado	Connecticut	Delaware	DC	Florida	Georgia	Hawaii	Idaho	Illinois	Indiana	Iowa	Kansas	Kentucky	Louisiana	Maine	Maryland	Massachusetts	Michigan	Minnesota	Mississippi	Missouri	Montana	Nebraska	Nevada	New Hampshire	New Jersey	New Mexico	New York	North Carolina	North Dakota	Ohio	Oklahoma	Oregon	Pennsylvania	Rhode Island	South Carolina	South Dakota	Tennessee	Texas	Utah	Vermont	Virginia	Washington	West Virginia	Wisconsin	Wyoming	TOTAL
STATE RATING	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
OPTIMAL LAWS: All-Driver Text Messaging Restriction	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	45 + DC
OPTIMAL LAWS: GDL Cell Phone Restriction				●				●	●	●			●		●	●		●	●		●	●	●	●	●						●	●	●		●	●	●		●		●		●		●			●	●		●	●	●	26 + DC

Iowa and Louisiana enacted new distracted driving laws, and, as a result, no longer receive credit for a GDL cell phone ban. Louisiana also no longer receives credit for a texting ban.