

Pennsylvania Still Debating Distracted Driving Laws

A respected nonprofit safety organization, the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, has issued a report saying that Pennsylvania is one of seven states that have a “dangerous lack of basic laws” regarding driving safety. This suggests that the state is missing many good opportunities to reduce the number of car accidents.

The report ranked individual states based on the number of recommended laws each had enacted. States could receive a green (good), yellow (average) or red (poor) ranking. Eight states had green rankings. Pennsylvania was one of seven states ranked in the red (poor) category. Distracted driving laws – such as texting while driving – were one of the measures of overall driving safety.

Pennsylvania Distracted Driving Debate

The distracted driving portion of the report may be of particular relevance to Pennsylvania. Currently, Pennsylvania has no laws prohibiting drivers from texting or talking while driving. However, laws restricting cell phone use while driving have been a hot topic in state legislatures, and Pennsylvania is no exception. The 2011 Pennsylvania legislative session will include a bill proposing a ban on texting while driving. It would also prohibit speaking on handheld phones, but hands-free mobile devices would still be allowed.

A similar bill failed in 2010, mainly due to debate whether the law would be “primary” or “secondary.” A primary distracted driving law would mean that drivers could be cited without any other violation. Secondary means that the driver would have had to do something else illegal, such as speeding or weaving between lanes, before getting pulled over.

Eight states ban all use of handheld cell phones, while 28 ban its use for new drivers. Eleven states passed laws banning texting while driving in 2010, bringing the total number of states to prohibit texting for all drivers to 30.

Other Traffic Safety Laws

Other laws the report recommended that Pennsylvania adopt include:

- Requiring seatbelts as a primary enforcement
- Forcing all DUI offenders to blow into an interlock device to check blood alcohol content before starting the ignition
- Not allowing unrestricted licenses until age 18

Overall, car accidents continue to take a terrible toll, both in Pennsylvania and across the country. Nationally, in

2009 the death toll was approximately 34,000, and over 2 million people were injured, many resulting in litigation. Pennsylvania, in particular, could do much more with legislation to cut down on accidents in the Keystone State.