

Safe Driving in Florida

Distracted driving has become a major traffic safety issue, and it is one that continues to worsen since new technology is introduced so often. While there are many factors related to driver focus, the most common concern is the distraction associated with the use of cell phones and other technology in the car. Millions of people in the United States utilize cell phones and other wireless devices daily, and many drivers do so while operating their vehicles. Most states have passed laws to govern the use of cell phones while driving. Some states have even completely banned the use of hand-held phones by all drivers. However, other states have laws that have only partial authority on cell phone usage while driving. My home state of Florida has recently enacted several measures to prevent distracted driving. These measures are stricter than Florida's previous attempts at reducing distracted driving. Nevertheless, some people argue that even with the preventative measures that Florida has legislated, they are not enough to prevent deaths due to distracted driving. The only foolproof method of avoiding accidents and deaths resulting from distracted driving comes down to the individual driver.

The use of cell phones while driving has become a leading source of distraction for drivers in recent years. This is because over 300 million people in the United States have cell phones, and "at any given moment during the daylight hours, more than 800,000 vehicles are being driven by someone using a hand-held cell phone" (Shinkle and Dubois). According to the National Council of State Legislatures, in 2015, over 3400 people in this country died in crashes involving a distracted driver (Shinkle and Dubois). Florida is a particularly distracted driving state, ranking as the second worst state for distracted driving according to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (Farrington). In 2016 alone, there were nearly 50,000 accidents resulting in 233 deaths that were the result of distracted driving (Farrington). As a result, in July 2019, Governor

DeSantis signed into law a bill that makes texting while driving a primary offense, meaning a driver can be pulled over by law enforcement and fined for texting and driving (Florida DMV). Prior to this law, texting while driving in Florida was only a secondary offense, which according to Sheriff Rick Wells, was “almost impossible to enforce” because officers could only cite drivers for texting if they were pulled over for another violation (Farrington). Now, the new law states that a first offense is punishable by a \$30 fine, with a second costing \$60. Court costs and fees also apply, and points are added to licenses. When enough points have been added to a driver’s license, the license can be suspended for specified periods of time (Florida DMV). While the law took effect July 1, 2019, warnings were given until January 2020, after which officers began writing citations. Florida is one of the last states to make texting while driving a primary traffic offense.

While Florida has made its law against texting and driving stricter, some people may still feel it is not enough to save lives. After all, a law is only as strong as its penalty for breaking it. In Florida, the first offense fine of \$30.00 and the second offense fine of \$60.00 is far lower than many other state fines for the same violations. For instance, 25 other states charge a minimum of \$100 for a first offense of texting while driving (Rosenblum). In Alaska, a driver can be charged with a misdemeanor and even given up to a year in prison with a \$50,000 if convicted (Rosenblum). Conversely, other states do not seem to view texting and driving as a big deal. As an example, the base fine for texting while driving in California is \$20 with no points assigned (Rosenblum). To make its own penalties stricter, Florida assigns 3 points from the very first conviction, and only 12 points are required in a 12-month period for a person to lose his or her license (Florida DMV). Furthermore, studies have shown that while secondary bans are nearly worthless, primarily enforced bans on texting while driving have reduced hospitalizations due to

traffic accidents. Specifically, traffic deaths involving teen drivers have been reduced by 11 percent, and traffic deaths for adults ages 22 to 64 have also been reduced because of the laws banning texting while driving (Florida Department of Transportation).

In summary, there are tools that can be used by law enforcement to reduce the number accidents and fatalities resulting from distracted driving. The use of high dollar fines, classifying texting while driving as a primary offense, and assigning penalty points to driver's licenses are a few effective tools that can be used by all states to reduce the number of distracted driving instances. Of course, the foremost effective strategy is the simplest and most economical, and it involves the individual driver making the simple yet powerful decision to put his or her phone away or to turn it off completely when operating a motor vehicle.

Works Cited

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