

Cell phones rules changing for Calif. drivers

by AP-News

To Celeste Tyler and her teenage friends, text-messaging is as effortless as tying their shoes. The high school senior can text without looking, sending messages on her red Samsung "slider" while it's behind her back, in her purse or under her desk at school, where cell phones are banned. So why not do it while driving?

Well, now the law. A state rule that takes effect Tuesday prohibits 16- and 17-year-olds from using any device to talk or text while driving, except in an emergency. A companion law allows adults to continue chatting away, but says they must use a hands-free device while driving.

And that's just not fair, Tyler said. "I've seen a lot of adult drivers that are way more irresponsible than my friends with licenses," said the 17-year-old, who is studying for her license. "People over 28 don't know how to use their phones very well." Most teenagers rarely talk on their cell phones, she said, preferring text and instant messaging instead. Texting is not specifically prohibited in the law for those 18 and older, but law enforcement officials say it's generally covered under statutes aimed at distracted drivers.

California's crackdown is part of a nationwide movement to get drivers' attention focused on the road rather than their conversations and their gadgets. Lawmakers in 33 states have introduced 127 bills related to driver distraction this year alone, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"Ten years ago, there were very few people with cell phones," said Matt Sundeen, the organization's transportation expert. "That's obviously changed."

New York, Connecticut, New Jersey and Utah are among the states with laws requiring hands-free use of cell phones. A Washington state law takes effect at the same time as California's. Some cities also have passed restrictions, including Chicago and Santa Fe, N.M., as has the District of Columbia.

In California, more than 4,000 people die in traffic accidents each year, according to the California Highway Patrol. After the hands-free law takes effect, the state should expect 300 fewer traffic fatalities every year, according to the Public Policy Institute of California.

Under the new laws, anyone seen driving with a cell phone to their ear will be subject to fines of \$20 for the first ticket and \$50 for subsequent tickets, plus additional fees that will more than triple the fine. Cited drivers will catch a break from the California Department of Motor Vehicles, which will not assign a violation point to their driving records.

Garry Weldon can't wait for the law to take effect. He's tired of sharing the road with chatty commuters and absent-minded text messagers. "Just yesterday, I was at an intersection and a person talking on their cell phone ran the red light," said Weldon, 50, a construction management inspector.

Still, some of the drivers-in-waiting at Sacramento's A-1 Driving School said they think the cell phone and texting ban is unfair and unlikely to change their habits. Michael Peoples, 18, says when he gets his license in a few weeks, he will only drive using his hands-free Bluetooth device. "I follow every rule I come across," Peoples said. "But I'm certain a lot of people won't. They'll be texting on the road."

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