

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley Seeks Changes In DUI Laws, Driving Age

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Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley proposed legislation yesterday that would delay a teenager's ability to get a driver's license by three months, impose tougher sanctions on drunk drivers and expand unemployment insurance to part-time workers laid off amid the economic downturn.

The legislation was among more than 20 "administration bills," most involving little or no cost to the state, that O'Malley (D) pledged to push in the current cash-strapped General Assembly session. Bills similar to several of the initiatives have died in previous sessions.

At an afternoon news conference, the governor also reiterated support for other measures he has said will be part of his agenda this session, including repeal of Maryland's death penalty; additional measures to protect domestic violence victims from guns; and new safeguards against surveillance activity by the Maryland State Police.

O'Malley also said he would resurrect a bill to authorize speed cameras statewide, which died last year, as well as a revised bill from last year intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Other proposals seek to increase state involvement in land-use planning; crack down on companies that misclassify workers as independent contractors; and make it easier for the state to recover damages from those filing false health coverage claims. A bill was also included to activate a provision in O'Malley's budget proposal that would freeze university tuition next fall for the fourth year in a row.

"These are common-sense initiatives that protect the progress we have made, continue to improve public safety in every community and every home in our state, and provide vital resources and assistance to Maryland families struggling to make ends meet during this national recession," O'Malley said.

The package introduced by O'Malley include several measures that will probably sail through and others whose outcome is far from certain. Repeal of the death penalty is likely to generate some of the most spirited debate of the session, and several bills favored by labor unions are expected to draw opposition. One would allow unions to collect fees from workers they represent in collective bargaining, even if the worker is not a member of the union. Similar measures have failed in the past.

The proposed restrictions on young drivers include pushing back the timetable for obtaining driver's licenses. A person would have to be 16 years old to obtain a learner's permit, instead of the current 15 years and 9 months. A full "graduated" license would not be available until the age of 18, instead of 17 years and 9 months.

The bill would also place an 11 p.m. restriction on nighttime driving by those younger than 18, instead of the current midnight curfew. Several tougher penalties are included for under-18 drivers cited for moving violations. A number of bills to further restrict teen drivers died last year after opposition from lawmakers who said such decisions should be left to parents, not the government.

The legislation targeting drunk drivers would implement some recommendations of a state task force, including a mandatory one-year suspension of a driver's license for anyone convicted more than once during a five-year period for alcohol- or drug-related violations.

O'Malley's domestic violence legislation would strengthen firearm restrictions in cases involving abuse. for One bill would require the surrender of all firearms by anyone subject to a final protective order that limits contact with an abused spouse or partner. That restriction is now at the judge's discretion.

The other would tighten the state protective order law to include all firearms. Currently, handguns are subject to protective orders, for example, but rifles are not.

Similar bills died in a House committee last year by lopsided votes.

O'Malley said his bill expanding the availability of unemployment insurance would bring Maryland into the ranks of 25 other states that allow benefits for laid-off part-time workers. A similar bill passed the Senate last year but died in a House committee.

A proposal introduced by O'Malley would create a "silver alert" system, similar to the Amber Alert system, to help locate seniors with dementia who have wandered away from their homes. Another would expedite information-sharing among state agencies and those in neighboring jurisdictions that serve juvenile offenders.

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