

March 2006

Teen Drivers

Every motor vehicle crash is a life-changing event, regardless of the outcome. A minor, property damage crash can include fines, court costs for the person at fault, points off your license, repairs, insurance deductibles, tows, as well as all the time it takes to deal with those issues.

What if the crash involves injuries? Ambulance and hospital bills can be several thousand dollars depending on the severity of injury. Then there's time for recovery, lost time from work or school, etc. If fatalities are involved, the consequences are even worse.

Because of recent incidents involving teenage drivers, the laws on Colorado recently changed. A recent report out of Washington, dated January 18th of this year, states that nearly 31,000 people were killed nation-wide in crashes involving drivers between the ages of 15-17 during the years of 1995-2004. The national report goes on to state that about one-third of those deaths (approximately 10,000 teens) involved pedestrians and people in other vehicles. The report also states that distractions in the vehicle significantly increase the risks of a crash and precautions taken early such as wearing a seat belt, and avoiding the urge to show off to other friends and young drivers may have helped decrease those numbers.

How do these statistics compare to Colorado? According to Mari Nelson of the Colorado Department of Transportation, in 2004, 93 teen drivers and passengers, ages 16 to 20, were killed in crashes statewide. About two-thirds of those who died were not wearing seat belts; nearly 80 percent of the teen passengers who died were in crashes involving teen drivers. The reports are staggering.

While it is important not to stereotype teen drivers, it is also important to realize what those numbers actually reflect. The facts, both from the national report and the Colorado Department of Transportation, suggest that distractions, failure to wear seatbelts, and the inexperience of young drivers to make sound driving decisions, can lead to severe injuries and, in many cases, death.

Obviously reports are just that, reports. They provide statistics based on an average in a particular control group. What they don't do is provide solutions. Now special interest safety groups and state lawmakers are challenged with the task of figuring out how to decrease those numbers and in a sense play a parenting role to help keep our children and everyone else on the road a little safer.

As a result, beginning July 1, 2006, the Colorado legislature developed new laws for drivers age 18 and younger. These laws do several things. First, they limit the times a teen driver can be on the road by establishing a curfew from midnight to 5:00am, unless returning home from a job. Second, for the first six months after obtaining a driving license, a teen driver can have no passengers under 21 years old. Third, from six months to a year after obtaining a driving license, a teen driver can have only one passenger under the age of 21. The laws exempt family members so a teen driver can carry their younger siblings in the car at any time. As a last note, the teen driver is exempt if there is a licensed adult in the car.

The penalty for breaking the new teen driving law is \$100 and up to two points off your license.

"We want to take all of the distraction and peer pressure out of the equation for young drivers," spokesman and Trooper Eric Wynn of the Colorado State Patrol said in an interview with the Denver Post December 28th in reference to a crash in Aurora where a 16 year old driver crossed a curb-high median and plowed into oncoming traffic. The teen had three 17-year-olds in the car at the time. Two passengers in the back seat were killed.

Teens and parents can go online at drivehomesafe.com for further information.

Until next month- Be safe!