

New restrictions on teen drivers unveiled
Sponsors gear up for any opposition to legislation

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CHICAGO - Some lawmakers from west-central Illinois - a region hit hard by teen driving fatalities - expressed support Wednesday for proposed legislation that would impose new restrictions on the state's youngest drivers.

The bill would incorporate nine recommendations from a task force Secretary of State Jesse White convened last year following a spate of fatal accidents involving teen drivers across Illinois. Over a 15-month period in Tazewell County alone, 15 youths died in highway-related deaths.

State Sen. Bill Brady, a Republican from neighboring Bloomington, cited the tragedies as he helped unveil the legislative package. He will be a co-sponsor of the bill, which is expected to be filed next week.

"Driving is not a right - it's a privilege," Brady said at a news conference in Springfield. "And it's a privilege that we have stewardship responsibility in this state to offer to people who have been properly trained."

Brady suggested the package may hit some bumps in the legislature. Chief Senate sponsor John Cullerton, a Chicago Democrat, said the bill may face resistance from lawmakers who assume their constituents oppose some of the changes.

One provision would triple the amount of time - from three months to nine months - that a teen (typically a 15-year-old) must hold a learner's permit. Only six states now have a permit phase that is nine months or longer, according to the Insurance Information Institute.

Another component would impose earlier curfews on teen drivers younger than 18, but they could get exemptions for work and school activities. The new driving curfews would be 10 p.m. weeknights and 11 p.m. on weekends, an hour earlier than current law requires.

"No one's going to come in and say they're not good things," Cullerton said at a news conference for the Chicago media. "We just have to educate legislators to make them realize that we're about saving lives."

Both Brady and task force member Jay Hoffman, a Democratic state representative from Collinsville, said some of the proposed restrictions could

be seen as burdensome to teens and their parents, particularly in rural areas where automobiles are the primary mode of transportation.

But many of Brady's counterparts from the Tazewell County region indicated they would back the teen-driving restrictions, pending a full review.

"I guess I would kind of err on the side of doing all we can to try to prevent" teen-driving deaths, said Rep. Mike Smith, a Canton Democrat. "We can't legislate caution, we can't legislate parenting ... but I think these types of measures can certainly help. If they end up saving one life, they're worthwhile."

Another component of the teen-driving bill would require student drivers to spend six hours on the road with an instructor, rather than reduce their time behind the wheel through proficiency exams. White has promised to help lobby for additional state funds that school districts may need.

The legislation also would double the six-month period in which a new driver is barred from having more than one teen passenger; exemptions would be made for family members. Passengers, not just the driver, would be ticketed for violations.

"This is called tough love," White said in Springfield. "They might not like Jesse White now, but once they reach the age of 21, they'll love me."

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Proposed new rules for teen drivers

- Triple the length of time - from three months to nine months - a teen must hold a learner's permit before applying for a driver's license.
- Shift the existing driving curfew on 16-year-olds from 11 p.m. to 10 p.m. on weekdays, and from midnight to 11 p.m. on weekends. Also new: The earlier driving curfew would include 17-year-olds.
- Double the six-month period during which new drivers cannot have more than one passenger with them who is under the age of 20. Police officers could ticket passengers, as well as drivers, who violate the restriction.
- Require public high school driver's education courses to offer at least six hours of street driving with a certified instructor. The provision would eliminate proficiency exams and other exemptions that reduce the minimum amount of required driving time.
- Require drivers under 18 who request court supervision for a traffic violation to appear in court along with a parent or guardian; court supervision by mail would no longer be an option.
- Suspend the license of a convicted driver under age 21 if the motorist

previously served a suspension for two moving violations in a 24-month period.

- Require a teen with a permit to drive conviction-free for nine months before becoming eligible for a restricted driver's license. The teen then must drive conviction-free for six months and turn 18 before receiving an unrestricted license.
- Revoke the license and impound the vehicles of drivers involved in street racing.