



Speech by the Hon. Carol J. Carmody

Thank you, Chuck. I appreciate being invited here today to speak to the individuals who are responsible for nothing less than a revolution in the way we license young novice drivers in the United States. Congratulations to the National Safety Council, and especially Chuck Hurley, for having the vision to convene this meeting of the world's major researchers on licensing young drivers.

I also want to recognize the great work done in this area by many of you here today—many of whom the Safety Board has worked closely with over the years—including the American Automobile Association, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the Governors' Highway Safety Representatives, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and the dedicated legislators who stepped up to the plate to fight for the laws that are now on the books in their states.

I would like to acknowledge our Canadian, Australian and New Zealand colleagues in attendance and the progress they have made on this issue in their countries.

Let me recognize the Safety Board staff who are here for the symposium—Elaine Weinstein, the Board's Director of Safety Recommendations and Accomplishments, Kevin Quinlan, who heads our Safety Advocacy Division, and Steve Blackistone, who is our state and local liaison.

Allan Williams has already discussed the patterns of risk for teenage drivers, but let me restate a few of the national statistics that demonstrate why this is such an important gathering:

- Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds in the United States.
- Teenage drivers are overrepresented in fatal crashes. According to statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), in 2000, 6.8% of the driving population was age 20 or younger, but they were involved in 14% of the fatal crashes.
- Half of the crashes involving young, novice drivers occur in the hours of darkness.
- Over two-thirds (67%) of passengers killed in crashes involving drivers between the ages of 14 and 17 are also teenagers between 15 and 19 years of age.
- The more teenage passengers there are in the car, the higher the accident risk.

The Safety Board first became involved in this issue in a 1993 safety recommendation letter to the states. The Board asked the states to implement measures to address underage drinking and to make changes in novice driver licensing requirements. Specifically, we asked the states to enact laws to:

- provide for a provisional license system for young novice drivers; and
- prohibit driving by such drivers between certain hours, especially midnight to 5 a.m.

Implicit in the Board's recommendation for a provisional licensing system was a three-stage graduated licensing system with a learner's permit, a provisional or intermediate license, and, finally, full unrestricted license. The use of a three-stage system is important because it allows for the incremental introduction of the driving privilege. The provisional license can be suspended or revoked or the unrestricted license can be deferred if certain conditions that encourage safe driving have not been met—and this is quite an incentive for most teenagers.

To date, 36 states and the District of Columbia have a three-stage graduated driver license (GDL) system and 35 states and the District of Columbia have a nighttime driving restriction. We are seeing the success of these systems as Dr. Simpson discussed this morning. For example:

- Colorado just recently reported a 45% reduction in fatalities involving 16-year-old drivers.
- Florida has reported a 9% reduction in fatality and injury crash involvement for 15- to 17-year-olds.
- Preliminary results of North Carolina's law show a 29% reduction in fatal and injury crashes involving 16-year-old drivers and a 49% reduction in nighttime crashes.

Everyone at this symposium should be gratified about the success we have achieved so far. But, we are not finished. State enactment of GDL legislation remains on the Board's list of most wanted safety recommendations. We look forward to working with all of you to ensure that all of the states have an effective GDL system in place.

Recent research indicates that the presence of teenage passengers increases the crash risk of teenage drivers, especially at night, and that the risk increases as the number of passengers increases. We believe this requires our attention.

The Safety Board reexamined the status of graduated licensing regulations in the states, including recent legislation related to teenage passenger restrictions. We found some very interesting results. We found that there is no uniformity among the states.

Some of the variations are the following:

- nighttime driving restrictions, which range from a short 4-hour period, such as 1–5 a.m. to an 8- or 9-hour period, such as 9 p.m. to 6 a.m.;
- minimum holding periods for learner permits do not exist in some states; others have a short period such as Indiana’s 2 months; or Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Vermont, with a 12-month minimum period;
- holding periods for the provisional or intermediate license range from 3 months in Maine to 2 years in Georgia. Some states specify that the restrictions end at age 18, while others end before age 18;
- the number of passengers permitted in the novice driver’s vehicle differs from state to state. Eight states allow no or one passenger until the driver receives an unrestricted license. Nine states and the District of Columbia have a similar restriction that extends into part of the intermediate licensing period;
- the age of the passengers allowed to travel with the teen driver also varies. In four states, the age of the passengers depends on the age of the driver;
- 10 states with a passenger restriction specify the age of the supervising driver. In nine states and the District of Columbia, the supervising driver could conceivably be another teen who was recently licensed; and
- the length of time the passenger restriction is in effect varies and in some states does not last throughout the full intermediate licensing period.

The Safety Board was only able to identify seven states (California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, and Wisconsin) that have provisions that include a

- three-stage graduated license system;
- passenger limitation of none or one;
- passenger restriction of at least 6 months; and
- requirement that the supervising driver be age 21 or older in both the learner’s and provisional stages.

Accordingly, I am pleased to announce that today the Safety Board is issuing two new safety recommendations to the states that we hope will contribute to strengthening the graduated licensing laws in the states.

The *first recommendation* asks that all states restrict young, novice drivers with provisional licenses from carrying more than one passenger under the age of 20, unless the driver is accompanied by a supervising adult at least 21 years old. This restriction would be in effect until they

receive an unrestricted license or for at least 6 months (whichever is longer).

The *second recommendation* asks that all states require that the adult supervising driver in the learner’s permit stage be age 21 or older.

Copies of these new recommendations will be distributed to you after lunch and are available on our website—<http://www.nts.gov/default.htm>.

The Board’s safety recommendations are its most important product and we have recently implemented a program to put more resources into our state advocacy effort to ensure their implementation. Each of the Safety Board Members has agreed to spearhead our efforts in 10 states. They will meet with state officials and legislators to promote the implementation of our recommendations. They will also speak at public events; target print, radio, and television media; and establish contacts with important state advocacy groups and coalitions. Board Members have already visited Massachusetts and Hawaii to discuss important safety issues. If your organization believes that we can help with testimony or by participating in an event or in meetings with grass roots organizations, please contact Elaine, Kevin, or Steve—either here or back in Washington.

So, where do we go from here?

We need to continue to make a compelling case for graduated licensing laws when we talk to legislators and community leaders. We have learned what Tip O’Neill knew—that “All politics is local.” Legislators respond to what they hear from their constituents. We need to be able to tell them about crashes in their state that can highlight and personalize the problem. We also need to be able to counter parents’ perceptions and concerns that graduated licensing is an inconvenience.

Legislators like to know what neighboring states in their region have done and how effective those efforts have been. We should have that information available for them. Although research is helpful in framing the problem, it is not persuasive by itself. Legislators respond to the human toll, the economic costs, the direct medical costs, and the number of families affected. They are also concerned about administrative costs and burdens and seem to prefer increased penalties and education rather than revisions to the existing licensing system.

Coalitions are important, but not always essential to success. Committed legislators and leadership support in each house are what counts. To ensure that we can make the most compelling arguments when we meet with legislators and others, we must review what works and what does not in enacting GDL legislation, what components make up a comprehensive GDL law, what best practices have been developed to implement and enforce existing GDL laws, what gaps exist in our knowledge and research, and what should our priorities be. I hope that by the end of the symposium you will have either the answers or a plan about how to get them.

I will close with a story that demonstrates the challenge we face and why this meeting is so important. Last July 31st, at about 2:00 p.m., a recently licensed 15-year-old, driving a sport utility vehicle (SUV) with five teenage passengers between the ages of 15 and 18, crashed while traveling on a highway near Columbus, Montana. The posted highway speed was 70 mph; the vehicle's speed was estimated to be between 70 and 76 mph. Weather and road conditions were clear and dry. As the driver negotiated "S" curves on a 5% uphill grade, she was turning around and talking to passengers in the backseat. When the vehicle went off the road, the driver overcorrected in an effort to return to the roadway, causing the SUV to go into a broadside skid and flip three times.

The driver and one passenger were ejected through the front of the vehicle, two other passengers were ejected from the side of the vehicle, and two remained inside. The driver died on scene. The passengers were transported to area hospitals—one was treated and released, two were in serious condition, and two were in critical condition. Not one of the six teenagers was wearing a seatbelt. No alcohol or drugs were involved. The driver had received her license on April 20th, providing her with just over 100 days of (potential) licensed driving experience at the time of the accident.

Montana still does not have a three-stage graduated licensing system, an intermediate license stage, a nighttime driving restriction, or a passenger restriction. And, the supervising adult driver can be less than 21 years old.

All of us share a common goal—saving the lives of young people. We know that strong, enforced graduated licensing laws will prevent countless deaths of teen drivers on America's highways. The case for graduated licensing laws is compelling. But we need to document the successes, learn from the failures, and organize our arguments to be sure our case is so strong that it cannot be ignored or negotiated away during the legislative process. By continuing to work together to affect public policy and encourage safe behavior—we will save countless lives. That is why this meeting—and the work you do every day—is so important.

Thank you for your tireless efforts on behalf of America's youth. And, thank you, again for inviting me to be here today.

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