

Stricter laws may leave N.J. teens facing tougher road to driver's license

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Teenagers who are learning to drive — and their parents — would face a longer road to a driver's license, under a tough new teen-driver safety law proposed in the Legislature.

Parents of teens with a driving learner's permit would be required to take a teen driver-orientation course, and the teenagers themselves would have to practice driving for up to 100 hours, under the bill sent to the state Assembly.

The bill would also lengthen the current six-month driver permit phase to one year, giving New Jersey one of the strictest teen driver safety laws in the nation.

The bill advanced today by the Assembly Transportation Committee in an 8-0 vote would build on previous teen driver safety efforts, such as decals signifying the driver is under 18, and a limit of one passenger.

The decal provision was part of Kyleigh's Law, named for Kyleigh D'Alessio, a 16-year-old honor student from West Morris Central High School who died in a December 2006 crash that also killed the teenage driver.

"Recognizing that no other age group on the road has a higher crash risk, lengthening the permit phase from a minimum of six months to 12 months will give teens the opportunity to practice driving over a longer period of time — which is critical," said Pam Fischer, leader of the New Jersey Teen Safe Driving Coalition and the mother of a teen driver.

"When it comes to learning how to drive," she said, "nothing takes the place of practice, practice, practice. Teens gain experience and build skill by driving on all types of roads, in all kinds of weather."

The bill would toughen requirements for both teenage drivers with permits and for their parents or guardians.

It would mandate 16-year-old permit holders to have 50 hours of "practice driving," in addition to the six hours of professional driver training that current law requires.

New drivers aged 17 or older are not required to take the six hours of professional training, and the bill would not mandate it, either. But they would be required to take 100 hours of practice driving — or be given the option of taking six hours of professional driving instruction and 50 hours of practice.

The practice-driving hours would be logged by parents, or a supervising adult driver, under an "honor system," which would be one of the topics explained in a teen driver orientation course parents would have to take.

Safety advocates were disappointed that parents or guardians would be allowed to complete the teen driver orientation program online rather than in person.

Assemblyman John Wisniewski (D-Middlesex), who chairs the Assembly Transportation Committee and cosponsored the legislation with Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt (D-

Camden), said the online option would give busy parents greater access to the orientation program.

"Now, there's no excuse," he said. Although specifics have yet to be worked out, charges for the course would be minimal.

Fischer cited statistics showing that teens whose parents set rules and monitor their activities in a helpful and supportive way are half as likely to crash, 71 percent less likely to drive intoxicated and 30 percent less likely to use a cell phone while driving.

"Parents ought to be part of the learning process," said Wisniewski, also the parent of a teen driver. "They ought to learn, along with their children, about the dangers of distractions. About how serious it is when you see the number of fatal and serious accidents that involve multiple teens in vehicles late at night — that's when all the accidents happen. So these restrictions are designed to make sure that we're not creating opportunities for these accidents to happen."

Kyleigh's mother, Donna Weeks, was in Trenton to support Assembly Bill No. **3309**, which she said would provide teen drivers with needed practice and give them and their parents vital information to help them make better decisions.



Star-Ledger file photoSixteen-year-old Kyleigh D'Alessio, who was a passenger killed on Dec. 21, 2006 in a crash of a car driven by another teen.

"I know what it feels like to lose an incredible child – and I don't want another family to have to live through the pain that my family and friends will for the rest of our lives," she said.

Arnold Anderson, a traffic safety investigator and member of the Teen Safe Driving Coalition, has had the heart-breaking experience of informing families that a loved one died from a crash.

"The most dangerous time in a person's life may be when they begin driving a motor vehicle," he said. "... The reason for the mishaps teens have on the road is that driver's manuals do not provide them with a driver's most valuable tool — experience."

Also today, the Assembly Transportation Committee approved a bill requiring parking lots owned by NJ Transit or other public agencies to stay open on weekends during special events such as sporting events, trade shows, expositions and concerts.

"New Jersey has a tradition of providing its citizens with the finest in sports and entertainment, namely at the Meadowlands, but the state hasn't always made it convenient to use mass transit to get to these events," Assemblywoman Connie Wagner (D-Bergen), who sponsored the legislation, said in a statement.

"The Meadowlands rail line, for instance, provides the public with the ability to enjoy these events while avoiding the stress and hassle associated with driving and parking," she said. "But public parking at the local rail passenger service stations is often restricted, discouraging the public from using mass transit. That must change."