

New driving laws will affect consequences of cellphone usage on Illinois roads

By Phillip Sitter

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When Illinois House Bills 1247 and 2585 take effect on January 1, 2014, Illinois drivers who make handheld use of their cellphones and other electronic devices when behind the wheel will face penalties if caught, especially if responsible for causing an accident when using a cellphone or other electronic device.

Illinois House Bill 1247 prohibits the use of all electronic communication devices when driving, with the exception of hands-free devices, two-way radios, and multiple-function devices whose other uses are not prohibited. The law also creates a graduated fine scale for repeat offenses, while granting that a first offense will not be a moving violation – essentially a warning.

Illinois House Bill 2585 establishes that any person convicted of using a prohibited electronic device and responsible for causing an accident that results in serious injury will be charged with a Class A misdemeanor. A person convicted of using a prohibited electronic device and responsible for causing an accident that results in the death of another person will be charged with a Class 4 felony.

In 2011, the most recent year for which data is available, nationwide, 3,331 people were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver, and an additional 387,000 people were injured, according to the federal government's official distracted driving website, distraction.gov. 21 percent of drivers aged 15 to 19 who were distracted and involved in fatal crashes were distracted by a cellphone, according to a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration statistic on distraction.gov.

Illinois will be joining 12 other states and the District of Columbia in its ban on handheld cellphone use, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's website.

"This is about raising awareness. Along with ads and commercials, hopefully this legislation helps make people more conscious," said Representative Donald Moffitt of Illinois's 74th District. "Legislation has reduced DUI problems, not eliminated them, but it's a start," Moffitt explained, looking to past legislation and other driving safety issues as precedents for progress he hopes the new laws will make.

"The [current] texting while driving statute is difficult to enforce, as it is difficult for the officer to determine if the person is looking through their contacts, using their phone for navigation etc. As of January 1st, this will all become much clearer for law enforcement with the enactment of legislation that cell phone use will also be prohibited without a hands free device," said Dixon Police Lieutenant Bradley Sibley.

Rock Falls Chief of Police Michael Kuelper does have a warning for those who continue using hands-free devices, however. "Even hands free devices are a distraction. It involves persons having to multi task. Your attention is drawn more toward the conversation and the thought process of the conversation instead of the attention needed to drive," Chief Kuelper said.

Sauk students Ashley McGinn and Marissa Razo said the new laws will probably not affect their behavior regarding cellphones and driving. "I don't do it in the first place," Razo said of her habit of not using a cellphone while driving.

"I'll try to get a headset for emergencies. I'm absolutely for [the new laws]," said Sauk student Steven Mendoza.

"They won't change anything. There are texting and driving laws and people still text," Sauk student Randall Divera believed.

“We strongly encourage people to use hands free devices. There is nothing worse than the senseless injury or death of someone that was completely avoidable ... People need to think about these things before making these potential life-changing decisions,” Lieutenant Sibley said.