

Commissioner's Column

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Distracted Driving and Its Impact on the Auto Insurance Market

Every day commuters in Louisiana are facing a danger that is entirely self-inflicted. Driving while distracted and the accidents that result from it are taking lives and contributing to increasing insurance premiums all over the country. April is National Distracted Driving month and many federal and state agencies are sounding the alarm. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that ten percent of all teenage drivers involved in fatal crashes were distracted at the time of the accident. The National Safety Council has released data that points to distracted driving as a major factor in the estimated eight percent rise in traffic deaths from 2014 to 2015. The Council also found that one in four fatalities on the road is caused by distracted driving.

When most people hear the phrase *distracted driving* they often think of texting and using a cell phone while at the wheel. While this is a big part of the phenomenon of increased traffic accidents and fatalities, it isn't the only way we are distracted while driving. Interacting with passengers, eating and using technology such as a GPS unit can lead to the same inattention. A study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that drivers spend more than half of their time behind the wheel focused on something other than driving. Following a decades-long downturn in the number of car crash fatalities, generally attributed to increased seat belt use and automobile improvements like stability-control systems and air bags, the number of fatalities has increased dramatically in recent months.

Cell phones aren't the only culprits however. Newer model automobiles include the latest in Wi-Fi connectivity and infotainment systems that include hundreds of radio options, the ability to play movies for passengers in the back seat and texting and traffic updates right in the dashboard. Studies show that even when these features are voice activated, they distract the brain from the primary job of focusing on the road ahead and the surrounding traffic. Other factors contributing to higher fatalities are more people driving more miles. As gas prices have fallen more people drive rather than taking other modes of transportation, whether the destination is around the block or across the state. More people at the wheel, increasingly not paying attention to the road in front of them, is a recipe for more accidents.

There are penalties in current law that prohibit using a cell phone to text message or post to a social networking site while operating a vehicle on any public road or highway. The fine is \$175 for the first offense and \$500 for each subsequent offense. Using a headset while driving is also prohibited and carries a penalty of \$25 plus court costs per offense. Operating a mobile device or

cell phone in any manner is prohibited while driving through a school zone during the posted hours, with only very few emergency situations exempted. The fine for a first offense is \$175 and any second or subsequent offenses carries a fine of up to \$500.

This legislative session Senate Bill 91, which proposes increasing these penalties, is before the Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works. Harsher penalties may indeed cause drivers to think twice before using their mobile phones while driving. The problem with this strategy is that many people see distracted driving as a largely victimless crime—which it clearly is not. The victims of this crime are our neighbors who suffer injury and possibly death in accidents caused by distracted driving. The victims are all of us who are burdened by higher insurance premiums and higher taxes to pay for the emergency services and police presence needed to clear the aftermath of these accidents.

However, state laws prohibiting such behavior don't seem to be making a dent in the amount of drivers who use cell phones while driving. Higher premiums and other financial repercussions may help drive home the seriousness of the matter. No less a public figure than Warren Buffet took on the hot button topic of distracted driving in his spring newsletter to Berkshire Hathaway investors, advising them that higher costs related to auto accidents caused by distracted driving caused significant losses for some of the largest insurance companies in the country. Allstate Insurance Corp recently attributed distracted driving to a rise in premiums, citing mobile phones and drivers surfing the internet while driving as the main offenders.

Premiums are also affected by the higher cost of vehicles as Americans grow more comfortable with purchasing new cars and trucks as the economy improves. With more technology including back-up cameras and park assist, new automobiles are more expensive to repair and replace in the event of an accident as well.

I think the best answer to the question, "What can we do about distracted driving" is to raise awareness of the choices drivers are making. Because make no mistake—it is a choice. Every time we text to let a friend know we are running behind in stop-and-go traffic on the interstate or check directions while driving down a residential street, we are making the choice to risk injury to ourselves and others. Speak out when you see friends at the wheel using their cell phones. Refuse to text back when you know people are driving. Even one death from a preventable cause is too many.