

Press Release



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CALIFORNIA MARKS TEN YEARS OF HANDS-FREE LAW

April Is Distracted Driving Awareness Month

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – Drivers are using their cell phones less often while driving, but distracted driving remains a serious safety challenge in California. Observing April as Distracted Driving Awareness Month and the first week in April as California Teen Safe Driving Week, traffic safety advocates will focus on education and enforcement efforts statewide as California marks 10 years of the hands-free laws.

In an effort to address the issue, the California Highway Patrol (CHP), California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS), and Impact Teen Drivers (ITD) have planned events throughout the state during the month of April to educate people on the dangers of distracted driving.

"California's distracted driving laws have been saving lives for a decade now," said former State Senator Joe Simitian, who authored the state's hands-free and no-texting laws. "Every day, somewhere in California, someone is sitting down to dinner with their family who wouldn't have made it through the day without these laws on the books. That's tremendously gratifying."

"However, there's more work to be done. Public education, meaningful penalties, and rigorous enforcement are all essential. Most importantly, all of us who are out on the road have to remember: it can wait," Simitian said.

Senate Bill 1613, the hands-free cell phone law, and Senate Bill 28, the no-texting law, were enacted in July 2008.

Data collected by the CHP shows decreases in the number of citations issued for distracted driving and in the number of inattention collisions since that time, but the problem persists. Last year, the CHP issued more than 97,000 citations for violations of the handheld cell phone laws. In 2009, the first full year of the hands-free law, the CHP issued more than 148,000 comparable citations.

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Preliminary 2017 data from the CHP's Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System indicates nearly 22,000 drivers were involved in distracted driving collisions in California, a decline from the more than 33,000 drivers involved in distracted driving collisions in 2007, before the hands-free law went into effect.

"Cell phones are everywhere in our lives. Tweeting, texting, and posting on social media are hard habits to break," CHP Commissioner Warren Stanley said. "However, they have potentially deadly consequences if you are driving. Any use of a cell phone or other distraction while operating a vehicle significantly impairs your driving ability. Changing those dangerous habits will help make our roadways safer for everyone."

Since 2011, OTS has conducted an observational study of handheld cell phone use every year. "This year's study on the use of handheld cell phones and texting shows a decrease over past years; however, more work needs to be done to target those who were observed to still be breaking the law," said OTS Director Rhonda Craft. "The best way to put an end to distracted driving is to educate all Californians about the danger it poses. We will do this through enforcement and education efforts like our new advertising campaign "Just Drive," reminding drivers to put down their phones and focus on the road."

In an attempt to drive the message home with the state's newest motorists, Impact Teen Drivers partners with California's traffic safety organizations to deliver an educational program that confronts the dangers and consequences of reckless and distracted driving.

"We lose 11 teens every day to preventable car crashes in the U.S. In California alone, we lose the equivalent of eight large yellow school buses each year to this deadly epidemic," said Dr. Kelly Browning, Executive Director of ITD. "It's time to stop the number one killer of teens in California. It's time we put two hands on the wheel, two eyes on the road, and most important, keep our minds focused on our driving. It will take a strong combination of education and enforcement to prevent distracted driving."

Although the traffic safety campaign will continue throughout the month, April 5th and 13th have been designated as statewide enforcement dates. On these two dates, the CHP and other law enforcement agencies throughout California will conduct education and zero-tolerance enforcement efforts to discourage distracted driving.

The California Highway Patrol and Office of Traffic Safety would like to remind drivers in California that the law prohibits them from having a cell phone in their hands while operating a motor vehicle.

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