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New National Legislation and Saferoads4teens Coalition Urge States to Adopt Model Teen Drivers Licensing Laws to Curb Leading Killer of Nation's Youth.

Members of Congress, parents, teens, pediatricians, police, insurance executives, and safety advocates call for passage of STANDUP Act to prod each state to enact lifesaving Graduated Driver Licensing laws for novice teen drivers.

With more than 80,000 deaths involving teen drivers over past decade, Saferoads4teens.org campaign calls on Americans to stand up for teen driving safety.

WASHINGTON, D.C. (Thursday, April 23, 2009) – As teens across the nation begin the ritual school prom season, concerned lawmakers, families, medical, safety and business representatives gathered by the U.S. Capitol today to announce introduction of the Safe Teen and Novice Driver Uniform Protection (STANDUP) Act (H.R. 1895) which sets minimum standards for state graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws, proven to reduce deaths and injuries among young beginning drivers and those who share the road with them.

Broad-based advocacy efforts in support of the STANDUP Act will be conducted through the newly-formed Saferoads4teens Coalition that will organize citizens across the nation in support of uniform passage of model GDL laws in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

GDL laws for novice teen drivers vary widely state to state, which has resulted in an uneven patchwork of strong and weak state GDL laws with loopholes through which thousands of teens are killed or injured each year. .

Rep. Tim Bishop (D-NY), Rep. Michael Castle (R-DE), Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), and Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT), co-sponsors of similar bills in the U.S. House and Senate, spoke about their legislation that would urge all states to set the same minimum policies for beginning teen drivers requiring a 3-stage licensing process (learner's, intermediate and unrestricted); limited driving at night and restricted number of teen passengers; bans on cell phone use and text messaging; and age 16 for issuance of a learner's permit, then full licensure at age 18.

For three years following congressional enactment of the STANDUP Act, states complying with the defined minimum requirements will receive incentive grants, at which point those that do not comply will forfeit a portion of their federal highway construction program funds until the necessary laws are adopted by the state.

The federal practice of withholding funds – known as “sanctions” – has worked effectively in the past to compel all 50 states and DC to swiftly and uniformly adopt highway safety policies, such as when President Reagan established 21 as the nationwide uniform minimum legal drinking age in 1984, and when President Clinton established the zero tolerance drinking-driving law for motorists under age 21 in 1995 and the allowable blood alcohol concentration level for drivers 21 and older at .08 percent in 2000.

With the leverage of federal sanctions, all 50 states passed these laws in the time allowed, and no state lost money. More importantly, these laws are credited with saving more than 25,000 lives. Using this approach to improve state teen driving laws will lead to significant reductions in teen driver crashes and related deaths and disabling injuries.

Rep. Bishop, the chief Democratic sponsor of H.R.1895 said that “this effort to bring all states into compliance with minimum federal standards for improved teen driving practices is vitally important to every American family and community. There isn’t a state in the nation, including New York, that has dodged the terrible suffering associated with preventable teen deaths in car crashes, year in and year out. The STANDUP Act is a means to a better end for future teens, their families and friends.” Rep. Bishop serves on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee that has oversight of the STANDUP Act and the multi-year, multi-billion dollar federal surface transportation program that is up for reauthorization this year.

"As a former Governor, I can attest to the critical importance of moving quickly to put proven-effective laws in place to prevent tragedies on our roadways," said Rep. Castle, chief Republican sponsor of the STANDUP Act. "Many states, like Delaware, have implemented some of the best Graduated Driver Licensing laws in the country, but federal leadership is vital to ensuring that legal loopholes are quickly closed off in every state across the country."

Rep. Van Hollen said, “Too many young people are dying before they have a chance to achieve their dreams because of driving related accidents. By passing the STANDUP Act, we will help save thousands of lives and keep families like Captain Didone’s from suffering the tragedy of losing a child.”

The members of Congress were joined by Captain Tom Didone of the Montgomery County (Maryland) Police Department who lost his 15-year old son, Ryan, in a crash involving a newly-licensed 17-year-old classmate in October 2008, and by Sherry Chapman of Hartford, Connecticut, who co-founded Mourning Parents Act (!MPACT) after her teenaged son, Ryan Ramirez, was killed as a passenger in a December 2002 teen driving crash.

“As a father who happens to be a traffic enforcement official,” said Captain Didone, “I know how very complicated the environment is, especially when you add newly-licensed teen drivers and their passengers to the mix. I also know all too well what a shattering event it is to lose a child. I am here today to give strong support for passage of the STANDUP Act. Our enforcement jobs would be much more effective if we knew that every state had the same minimum requirements for beginning teen drivers.”

Dr. Joseph Wright, MD, a pediatrician and Sr. Vice President of the Child Health Advocacy Institute and Emergency Medicine and Trauma faculty member at Children’s National Medical Center, Washington, DC, said, “If a deadly virus was rampant throughout the nation and a cure in the form of a preventive vaccine was somehow withheld or stalled, don’t you think the federal government would step in and demand that something be done? This is not unlike the situation we find ourselves with the teen driving epidemic today, and that is why I strongly support the STANDUP Act. Graduated driver licensing is a proven, effective, preventive approach that saves teen and other lives all across our nation.”

Natalie Hayford, a member of Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) at Anoka High School in Andover, Minnesota, said that “each and every state should do everything they can to better prepare us for the huge responsibility of driving a car. It is time for the Congress and states to act as if our lives depend on it – because it does.” Natalie, who has won awards for her leadership on the teen driver safety issue in her rural community, added that “critics may ask, ‘What about rural teens who need to drive themselves into town for school or work?’ As a teen from a rural area, I’m here to say that rural roads are among the most dangerous and they are especially deadly for inexperienced teen drivers. It’s better to have effective laws that phase in the full driving privilege and help us become truly safe drivers. School and work don’t matter if you’re killed in a crash.”

William Vainisi, Vice President and Assistant General Counsel of Allstate Insurance Company, said “This is an issue that is bigger than any one person or company or coalition. This is a threat to our collective health that penetrates every corner of America...and it’s time we do something about it.” Allstate has joined with other insurance companies, including State Farm, Farmers, Liberty Mutual, USAA, Nationwide, Unitrin, GEICO and American Family in supporting the new Saferoads4teens Coalition, managed by the staff of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

An ELECTRONIC PRESS KIT is available for download at www.saferoads4teens.org containing broadcast quality video, audio, b-roll, and the contents of today’s press kit, including the news release, speakers’ remarks, teen driving statistics, a summary of the STANDUP Act, and a fact sheet showing how each state’s teen driving laws currently stack up against the STANDUP Act standard.

A playback of today’s WEBCAST of the STANDUP Act news conference also is available at www.saferoads4teens.org

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