

ON THE PULSE

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Limits on young drivers could help save lives

The statistics are sobering. In 2005, about 7,500 teenage drivers nationwide and 260 in Illinois were involved in car crashes fatal to them, their passengers or others. Young drivers make up just 6.3 percent of the driving population but are involved in 12.6 percent of the fatal crashes. Traffic crashes are, by far, the leading cause of death among adolescents. Those statistics are more than enough justification for the state to take every reasonable step to save more young lives.

Identifying those steps was the goal of a task force appointed last year by Secretary of State Jesse White. And that task force's recommendations are now the guts of a bill that the Legislature should pass this spring. In short, the changes would make the process of obtaining an Illinois driver's license one of the nation's toughest.

Among the most significant proposals would be to triple the permit phase from three months to nine months. As the task force notes, that would not only give teens more time driving with an experienced adult but would also be more likely to expose them to driving in diverse weather conditions than the current three-month phase. Most states already require at least a six-month permit period.

The bill also proposes to make the ban on nighttime driving start an hour earlier each night — 10 p.m. on weekdays and 11 p.m. on weekends — and subjecting 17-year-olds, and not just 16-year-olds, to the ban. Studies have shown that such restrictions can reduce fatal teen crashes by up to 10 percent.

In addition, the bill would extend the ban on teens under 18 transporting more than one unrelated

teen passenger from six months to a year. That would limit the distractions from multiple teen passengers that experts say are a leading cause of crashes. The bill also proposes to allow police to ticket teenage occupants who violate the passenger restriction law.

The proposal also would eliminate exemptions that students in driver's education classes now can use to avoid the required six hours of supervised street driving.

Those changes and variety of others would establish a graduated system in which teens gain more rights as they spend more time behind the wheel and keep their driving record clean. It's a smart, proven approach; a study cited by the task force found that the best graduated programs can reduce traffic fatalities for 16-year-olds by as much as 21 percent. That's too positive to ignore, even though many of the proposed changes could cause hardships for teens and their parents. No law can stop every teen from rash or careless driving, but we can and should minimize the risk by establishing the best possible licensing process.

This represents the view of Sun-Times News Group newspapers in metropolitan Chicago.