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**Journal Register**

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— Publisher's statement June 19, 1881

## OUR OPINION

# Toughen rules for teen drivers

**WE WORRY** about a lot of things when it comes to our teenage children — school safety, who their friends are, underage drinking, to name just a few.

Yet, it is that perennial rite of passage — obtaining a driver's license at age 16 — that truly poses the greatest threat of all to young people.

Vehicle crashes rank as the No. 1 cause of death among adolescents. In 2005 in Illinois, vehicular crashes involving drivers between the ages of 15 and 20 killed 260 people. So while we expect some of the safety initiatives announced by Secretary of State Jesse White will be somewhat controversial, we salute him for putting together a package that could make a big difference in the number of teenagers who die in vehicle accidents in Illinois.

The legislation being pushed by White — and introduced by state Sen. John Cullerton, D-Chicago — includes 10 proposals that would strengthen Illinois' graduated license program. That is the program that dictates how people under the age of 21 receive their driving privileges.

**SOME OF THE** proposals are quite tough — we suspect they will not be eagerly accepted by young drivers, and in some cases even their parents. But they make sense for Illinois' most inexperienced motorists.

For example, presently in Illinois a teenager can receive a driver's license after holding a learner's permit for only three months. That short permit phase makes Illinois one of the least restrictive states when it comes to the length of the permit period.

White's new package of restrictions includes a proposal to lengthen the learner's permit phase to nine months and require that the young person drive conviction-free for that entire time. A teenager would not receive a restriction-free license — sans curfew and other rules — before the age of 18 and before demonstrating a clean driving record of at least six months.

The proposals also include:

- Increased behind-the-wheel time in driver education classes.

- Requiring teenagers to appear in court with their parents when they ask for court supervision on driving offenses. (In some tragic teen accident cases parents have only learned after the death of their children that they had already had traffic violations.)

- Increasing from six months to a year the time before a new driver can have more than one passenger under the age of 20 in the vehicle. (Studies have shown increased numbers of younger passengers greatly increase the chances of a wreck.)

The bill's proponents acknowledge the stricter curfews called for in the bill will be the most controversial part of the package — they would require teens to be off the road by 10 p.m. instead of 11 p.m. on weekdays and 11 p.m. instead of midnight on weekends. Even if the curfews are not adopted — and we agree there will be a battle over those — the rest of the package could be extremely beneficial in the long run.

**IF THE PROPOSALS** are passed into law, parents will play a big role in the effectiveness of these new restrictions. There are not enough police in Illinois to search for every car with an extra teenage passenger in it, nor do we have enough cops to make sure all 16-year-olds have pulled into their garages by 11 p.m. on Saturday night. The same parental enforcement is also key to the recently passed law that requires more driving practice time for teenagers.

We know even if these proposals become law, they will not be a panacea nor will they be perfectly enforced. But we believe by raising the bar this way, by expecting more from young drivers, Secretary White and the General Assembly will be helping to lower the teenage death toll.