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Editorial

## Safety concerns should drive teen license laws

A driver's license is a ticket to long-sought independence — for teens as well as parents. Unfortunately, that independence comes at a steep price for adolescents.

Way too many have to pay for their inexperience and risk-taking with their lives.

How wrong is that? Illinois lawmakers have a chance to make it right.

Secretary of State Jesse White has proposed legislation that would make Illinois a model in graduated licensing for 16- and 17-year-olds. The proposals came from a task force he appointed last summer. Its recommendations were released last month.

The regulations would triple the amount of time a teen must have his or her driving permit — from three months to nine months. The curfew for 16- and 17-year-old drivers would be an hour earlier. The time period during which new drivers can transport only one unrelated teen passenger would be extended from six months to one year.

The bottom line is that teens wouldn't get full driving privileges until they are 18. Privileges would not be automatic: Any 18-year-old who doesn't obey the restrictions would have to earn back the privileges through compliance.

Why all the micromanagement? Why can't the state just trust kids?

The statistics are unequivocal on the hazard presented by teen drivers, especially drivers in their first or second year of driving. They spend less time behind the wheel than other drivers, but their crash rates are disproportionately high.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the crash rate per mile driven for 16-19-year-olds is four times the risk for older drivers. The risk spikes at age 16. The crash rate for 16-year-olds is twice that for 18- to 19-year-olds.

In all, traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among teenagers. In 2005, the latest year for which fatality statistics were available, 5,288 teenagers (from 13 to 19 years old) died in motor vehicle crashes.

The problems stem from teenagers' inexperience, immaturity and biological tendency to take risks. The majority of fatal crashes are one-vehicle crashes. The typical crash involves the teen driver running off the road; more often than not, other young people are in the car. The highest percentage of deaths occurred between 9 p.m. and

midnight.

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White's proposals take all these factors into account. By limiting night driving hours, by extending the permit period and by limiting passengers in the car, safety experts believe there is an excellent chance to reduce deaths and injuries. Both the National Safety Council and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety have endorsed the plan.

Opposition to the proposal could come from parents who think it's too hard to stay on top of the litany of laws governing teens on the road.

They have a point. If White succeeds in getting the regulations passed — and he should — Illinois should not scrimp on education and enforcement. If this turns out to be a feel-good for lawmakers, teens will be able to see that coming a mile away.

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