



Odell Mitchell JR. | Post-Dispatch

## OUR VIEW | TEEN DRIVERS

# Clipped wings save lives

**M**ore 16-year-olds will see their 17th birthday because Illinois will tighten its drivers licensing rules for teenagers. Secretary of State Jesse White and the Illinois General Assembly deserve credit for a good bill that protects the young — and the rest of us — from themselves.

Compelling evidence for the change comes from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. The center studied the effects of graduated drivers licenses on teen accident rates. Sixteen-year-old drivers are involved in 38 percent fewer fatal crashes in states that have at least five of seven common characteristics of graduated drivers license programs. The drop in crashes with injuries was 40 percent, Johns Hopkins reported in a study funded by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

Mr. White's task force on teen drivers paid close attention to statistics such as these and recommend tightening the Illinois law. The Illinois General Assembly unanimously passed it, and Gov. Rod Blagojevich plans to sign it.

Starting Jan. 1, new teen drivers will have to hold a permit for nine months, instead of the three months now required, before getting an intermediate license that lets them drive without an adult. Teen license applicants need at least six hours of over-the-road instruction with a driving instructor, something they usually get in a drivers education class. They'll no longer be able to get by with driving simula-

tors or circling parking lots.

Teens find each other very distracting, and that leads to accidents. So, for their first year, instead of the first six months, as licensed drivers teens can have only one friend 15-20 years old in the vehicle. Family members aren't covered by the limit.

The curfew for drivers under 18 will be moved one hour earlier to 10 p.m. weekdays and 11 p.m. weekends. There are exemptions for special circumstances, such as returning from work or school activities.

Youthful exuberance is wonderful. But combined with inexperience, it can yield tragic results on the highway. The Illinois law wisely insists that teens build more experience before gaining the full freedom of the road.

Missouri adopted a graduated drivers license system last year, although it's not as strict as the new Illinois law. Teens must hold a learners permit for six months before applying for an intermediate license. There is no requirement for professional driving instruction, although teens must have at least 40 hours behind the wheel with a qualified adult. For the first six months after getting an intermediate license, they may carry only one passenger under age 19. Three such passengers are allowed for the next six months. Until age 18, they can't drive between 1 a.m. and 5 a.m.

Missouri officials should look at the Hopkins study and consider tightening their rules, too.