

Florida won't promote its new texting-while-driving law

September 16 2013, by Rochelle Koff

Starting Oct. 1, texting while driving will be illegal in Florida, but absent state funding to promote the law, efforts to get the public up to speed with the changes could be spotty.

Digital message boards along the state's highways will light up with the message: "Don't Text and Drive. It's the Law," on Sept. 19 and Oct. 1 and 15, but otherwise don't expect a major Florida safety campaign.

The reason? Gov. Rick Scott vetoed \$1 million put in the budget in part to help promote the ban.

For Russell Hurd, whose daughter Heather was killed in a [texting](#)-related accident on her way to meet with a Walt Disney World wedding planner in Orlando, Fla., in 2008, the lack of a public safety campaign is one more lapse by the state.

"To pass the [law](#) as weak as it is and not back it up with continuing education is just meaningless," said Hurd, who has been instrumental in pushing for texting laws in his state of Maryland, which will make all use of handheld phones illegal for drivers next month.

Florida will become the 41st state to prohibit texting while driving. But unlike the majority of those states, the law will be a secondary offense. That means an officer will first have to witness another offense, like swerving or running a [stop sign](#), to ticket the texter. Another roadblock: It's OK to text if you're stopped at a [red light](#) or if you have a talk-to-text

device like the iPhone's Siri.

The penalties are \$30 plus court costs for a first offense and \$60 for a second offense.

State Rep. Doug Holder, R-Venice, proposed the educational campaign and worked on getting a texting bill passed for five years. He thought the money lawmakers budgeted "was a good way of educating the public because texting was such an important bill and it took so long to get passed," he said.

"I can't tell you I'm not disappointed," he said. "But I understand the governor made it very clear he'd be looking very closely at returns on investment."

State Sen. Nancy Detert, also a Venice Republican and a fellow champion of the texting law, said the bill has received so much coverage "that everyone knows it's passed. The only question I hear from the public is 'When does it start?'"

Others are more critical of the law and the state's decision not to heavily promote it.

"It's almost worthless as far as I'm concerned," said David Teater, senior director of the National Safety Council. "The state is telling kids that you can text as long as you don't do anything else wrong."

The state is doing some things. The state Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles and the Department of Transportation will join a campaign being led by wireless phone companies to discourage students from texting while driving.

FDOT, with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, is

sponsoring "Put It Down Day" Oct. 1 to coincide with the new law.

As for enforcement, the Florida Highway Patrol and other law enforcement organizations said their officers are alerted to all new traffic laws but they haven't planned any special training to get ready.

Don't expect any grace periods such as those given to Ohio motorists, who had a six-month education period where police could warn drivers but not issue tickets.

Miami-Dade County School Board Chair Perla Tabares Hantman, a longtime proponent of a texting ban, said that while some wanted a stronger law, it's a step in the right direction. "In October, there will be pledge drives, rallies, events - children will be made aware of the law," she said.

FLORIDA TEXTING BAN TAKES EFFECT OCT. 1

Florida will become the 41st state to ban texting while driving next month. The violation will be a secondary offense, meaning law enforcement officials first must pull drivers over for another reason. Starting Oct. 1:

- Drivers cannot manually type or enter multiple letters, numbers, symbols or other characters into a wireless communications device or while sending or reading data for "nonvoice interpersonal communication." This includes texting, emailing and instant messaging.

- Texting is allowed in hands-off, high-tech cars and when a car is stopped at a red light or in a traffic jam.

-Texting is allowed to report criminal activity.

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