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Hands on the Wheel

Have you ever been hit or nearly hit by someone who was talking on their cell phone? Or can you think of a time that you swerved out of your lane because you were texting or talking on your cell phone? There are many reasons people talk on their cell phones while driving. We could be discussing a favorite TV show with a friend, trying to schedule a doctor's appointment, checking on a child, catching up with family or friends, thinking, planning, or possibly even arguing. This would be fine if we were just sitting at the office or in our living rooms, but not when driving a vehicle.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates your chance of getting in an accident increases by 300% if you're talking on your cellular phone while driving. This is an estimated 6 percent of all crashes. Studies done over the last 5 years have concluded that cell phone distractions have caused 2,600 deaths and 330,000 injuries each year (Harvard Center of Risk Analysis.). This equates to an annual cost amount of \$43 billion. Using cell phones while driving, experts say, can be the equivalent of driving with a blood alcohol level of .08; the threshold of the legal limit (CBS' "The Early Show").

The number of cell phone users has increased by over 600%. In 2005, approximately 10 million people were cell phone users in the United States. The number of current users has risen to approximately 270 million subscribers according to the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association. A Nationwide Insurance public opinion poll showed 81 percent of the public admitted to talking on a cell phone while driving. . The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration estimates that at any given moment during daylight hours, 8 percent of all drivers are talking on a cell phone.

With technology becoming ever more advanced drivers can now surf the internet, send text messages, read their e-mails. This makes driving while distracted even more frequent. Statistics show that crashes caused by drivers using cell phones have increased from 636,000 in 2003 to 1.6 million in 2008. According to a recent survey done by the AAA Foundation, nearly 80 percent of respondents said that texting or e-mailing while driving was a very serious threat to safety, yet many of those same people admitted to texting or talking on their cell phone in the last month.

Increased public awareness of the dangers associated with distracted driving has raised support for some type of cell phone usage restriction legislation. A survey conducted by Nationwide Insurance showed 80 percent of respondents support a ban on text messaging and e-mailing while driving and 67 percent are supportive of laws restricting phone calls while driving. This is possibly due to Nationwide's 2008 survey that revealed 45 percent of respondents had been hit or nearly hit by another driver using a cell phone.

In late September 2009 a Distracted Driving Summit was held by the U.S. Department of Transportation. During the Summit, the affects of distracted driving on various modes of transportation such as rail, commercial trucks and passenger vehicles were discussed. As a result of the Summit, President Obama signed Executive Order 13513, Federal Leadership on Reducing Text Messaging While Driving. Impacting all federal employees and contractors, the Order prohibits all federal employees and contractors from sending text messages while operating a government vehicle or when driving a privately owned vehicle while on government business, or using any type of electronic device supplied by the government while driving to send text messages.

The Department of the Army has also put policies into place in a effort to stop distracted driving. According to Army Regulation 190-5, Chapter 4-2c (3), Vehicle operators on a DOD installation and operators of Government owned vehicles will not use cell phones unless the vehicle is safely parked or unless they are using a hands-free device. Also, for those driving on Fort Campbell, the Fort Campbell Motor Vehicle Regulation (CAM Reg 190-5, Chapter 4-1 d (1)) authorizes the use of Mobile personal electronic devices (cell phones and other PDAs) only with a hands free device or single-ear piece. Failure to adhere to this regulation will result in a written warning for the 1st offense, suspension of installation driving privileges for six months for the 2nd offense and suspension of driving privileges for twelve months for the 3rd offense.

Due to the preventable nature of accidents caused by distracted driving, drivers should stay off the phone and keep their focus where it needs to be, on the road. Cell phone restriction laws alone won't make our roads safer, we need to stigmatize distracted driving the same as drunken driving through education and awareness.

How serious would you take it if you were actually in a severe accident because someone else was texting while driving? What if you caused a serious accident because you were talking on your cell phone? In January 2010 the National Safety Council released a report that showed 28 percent of traffic accidents are caused by people sending text messages or talking on their cell phone.

In order for everyone to have a safer driving experience, if your cell phone rings or it is necessary for you to make a call, pull off the road to a safe location first. Keep your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the road.