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Starting July 1, no more free passes for texting (or holding your phone at all) and driving



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Using a hand-held cellphone to figure out directions while driving is illegal and Illinois will stop giving a free pass to first-time offenders as of July 1. Instead you'll get a moving

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Illinois' law

(https://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/drivers/traffic_safety/distracted.html) banning driving and texting is now five years old, and drivers caught violating it will face a stiffer penalty as of July 1.

Scofflaws who text, talk or use any hand-held devices behind the wheel will receive a ticket for a moving violation. Three moving violations in a 12-month period will lead to a license suspension.

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Lawmakers tightened the law in 2018, removing a provision giving first-time offenders a free pass.

The tougher stance reverts back to what Secretary of State Jesse White "wanted in the original bill, and it was negotiated down," spokesman Dave Druker said. "There was a lot of feeling it was a little harsh."

Being nice, however, wasn't working, authorities found. White and Illinois State Police "felt it wasn't making a dent," said Elgin Democratic Sen. Christina Castro, who sponsored the change.

Of course, readers of this column know how the law works. But if you want to give friends a refresher, remind them it's illegal to use a hand-held iPhone, Galaxy or any device while driving.

That means no texting, talking, accessing the maps app and so on, unless with hands-free phone technology such as Bluetooth.

It also means you should save your creative explanations, police advised.

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"We get all kinds" of excuses, Des Plaines Police Chief William Kushner said. "The best example is people think it's OK to text while they're stopped at a stoplight. It drives me crazy." photo
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drive

"People will say anything to rationalize their behavior. We've heard, 'I don't have hands-free in my car so I had to hold my phone.'"

To clarify, it's also illegal to text or talk while holding a device at a stop sign, at a red light or while sitting in traffic.

What if I just take a second to do something with my phone?

Not OK, said Aurora police Sgt. Bill Rowley.

"In the amount of time it takes to simply look down and check a text -- if your car is traveling 40 mph -- it has already traveled half the length of a football field," said Rowley, Aurora's public information officer. That means "if a child runs out on the road, there's no time to touch your brakes."

Drivers can pull over on the shoulder, put the car in park and use their devices. Exceptions to the law include reporting an emergency, and if normal traffic is stopped because of an obstruction such as an accident or train -- and the car is in park.

Nationwide, there were 2,923 distracted-driving-related crashes in 2013 compared to 2,935 in 2017, according to an April National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study.

In Illinois, 67 fatal crashes involving a distracted driver occurred in 2017, which is higher than the five-year average of 48. Overall, Illinois crashes totaled 12,930 in 2017, although the average was 12,492.

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Interestingly, AAA found in 2018 that 97% of drivers think texting or emailing while operating a vehicle is dangerous, but 35% admitted to doing it anyway.

And just because hands-free systems are allowed, it doesn't mean they are safe. Experts warn that mental distraction also is dangerous.

Common sense is key, Kushner said. "We can't fix stupid. We can just give it a court date."

Got a comment on distracted driving? Send it to mpyke@dailyherald.com.

Your voice

After last week's column on the state capital bill including \$300,000 in earmarks for dog parks, Mike Biba of Huntley wrote, "Absolutely ridiculous! How about \$300,000 for children who need medical attention and cannot afford it. If we cannot find a better use for the money we really have a problem."

But Robert Scott Steinberg of Hoffman Estates thinks "taking your dog to a dog park is a blast. Dogs like to socialize and play, free of a leash. Untethered, most run like crazy, taking turns on who chases who. Memberships for dog park access usually sell out."

Gridlock alert

Getting used to the Silly Straw construction lanes at the Reagan Memorial Tollway (I-88) and Tri-State (I-294) interchange? Too bad, because it's shifting. New configurations are coming to the ramps connecting eastbound I-88 to southbound I-294 and northbound I-294 to westbound I-88. Bottom line, don't speed, watch the signs, and may the Force be with you.

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