



Bureau of Transportation Safety
and Technology
700 SW Harrison
Topeka, KS 66603-3754

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NEWS CONTACT:

Chris Bortz

KDOT Bureau of Transportation Safety and Technology
785-296-3756

or

Neal Thurman

Trozzolo Communications Group
816-842-8111

Kansas Law Enforcement Can Issue Tickets for Texting While Driving Beginning Jan. 1

Drivers urged to “put it down” when behind the wheel and focus on the road

TOPEKA – Beginning Saturday, Jan. 1, 2011, motorists can expect to receive traffic tickets if they text and drive in Kansas.

State and local law enforcement officers have been issuing warnings for this violation since July 2010, according to the Kansas Department of Transportation. However, the law provides that tickets can be issued beginning Jan. 1, 2011. Drivers receiving citations will be subject to a minimum fine of \$60, plus court costs.

“Kansas law bans texting for all drivers,” said Pete Bodyk, KDOT traffic safety manager. “For all drivers with a learner’s permit or intermediate license, the law also bans all cell phone use – both handheld and hands-free. Officers will begin issuing tickets to offenders Jan. 1, 2011.”

Law enforcement may issue a ticket simply by observing a violation; they need not have stopped a driver for another reason. The Kansas law applies even if a vehicle is stopped at a red light or stop sign.

“Learner’s permit and intermediate-licensed drivers typically are under age 20, the age group with the highest proportion of distraction-related fatal crashes nationally,” Bodyk said. “Drivers with those permits who are convicted of the violation may be subject to delays in full licensure as well as fines and court costs.”

Bodyk said Kansas is one of 30 states to ban text messaging for all drivers. Eight states prohibit all handheld cell phone use while driving, and the federal government has banned texting while driving by federal employees on duty and all commercial truck and bus drivers.

Distracted driving is any activity that takes a driver’s eyes off the road, hands off the wheel or mind off the task of operating a 2,000-pound machine. There are many driving distractions, but texting is the most alarming because it involves all three types of distraction.

Studies show that texting drivers are 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash. The proportion of drivers distracted at the time of fatal crashes increased from 8 percent in 2004 to 11 percent in 2008, when nearly 6,000 people died and more than a half a million were injured in crashes involving a distracted driver. While these numbers are alarming, they may not show the true size of the problem, since driver distractions may be vastly under-reported to law enforcement.

“Drivers take their eyes off the road five seconds per message on average,” Bodyk added, citing federal research. “That is long enough for a vehicle traveling 55 mph to go 134 yards – farther than a football field and its end zones. We urge all drivers to ‘put it down’ when behind the wheel to avoid a ticket and to save lives.”

More information is available at www.distraction.gov. The Kansas statute on texting and driving is K.S.A. 8-15,111, which can be found at www.ksdot.org/burTrafficSaf/lel/laws.asp.

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