

News

## NEW RULES OF THE ROAD: State further restricts teen drivers

Sunday, March 21, 2010

By PATRICIA DOXSEY  
Freeman staff

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ERICA Gedney says she can understand why the state is placing tougher restrictions on driver licenses issued to 16- and 17-year-olds.

But the 16-year-old Kingston resident, who recently applied for her learner's permit, is bothered by some of the new limitations, especially the prohibition against junior license holders having more than one non-immediate family passenger under 21 in the vehicle.

"It's not really convenient, especially if you want to go somewhere with your friends," she said.

AND THERE'S more.

Under new state laws that took effect Feb. 22, all 16-year-olds and some 17-year-olds must hold their learner's permit for six months and have 50 hours of supervised driving, including 15 hours after sunset, before they can take their road test. Previously, 16- and 17-year-olds were required to have only 20 hours of supervised driving.

Seventeen-year-olds who have taken a driver education course are exempt from the six-month requirement.

As a result of the six-month permit requirement, the new law eliminates the "limited use" junior license that was issued to 16- and 17-year-old drivers who took their road test within six months of getting their permit. Under the limited-use junior license, holders were permitted for the first three months to drive only to and from school.

STILL IN EFFECT is a prohibition forbidding junior license holders from driving between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m., except to and from work or school, or with a parent or guardian in the vehicle.

Additionally, junior license holders cannot have more than one non-immediate family passenger under the age of 21 in the vehicle, unless there is a supervising driver in the front passenger seat.

"The basis for the new law was twofold," said Ulster County Clerk Nina Postupack, who oversees the state Department of Motor Vehicles office in Kingston. "The (state) Department of Motor Vehicles and Traffic Safety believes the main reason for teenage accidents is distraction and inexperience. Making them hold their permit for six months will give them more experience, and allowing only one non-family member will do away with the distractions."

"I THINK IT'S a good thing," Kellee Esposito of Hurley said recently as she waited at the Department of Motor Vehicles office in the Ulster County Office Building while her 16-year-old son, Dominick, took the written test for a learner's permit.

Esposito said she had placed her own restrictions on her two older children as they moved through the licensing process.

"I know there are some parents who couldn't wait for their kids to get their license," she said. "I'm a nurse, and I've worked in the (intensive care unit), and I saw a lot of accident victims. I just think waiting a little longer and making them get more experience matures them a little bit more.

"Around here, kids are thrown into inner-city driving very quickly," she said. "There is a lot of traffic and a lot of decisions that have to be made

very quickly. I don't know if they realize the seriousness of driving.”

ACCORDING TO the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and injury among 15- to 20-year-olds, and 16-year-old drivers experience crashes almost three times as often as more experienced drivers ages 18 and 19. The CDC says the crash risk for young drivers is greatest at night, and also increases when passengers are in the car.

Statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Association show that in 2008, 2,739 drivers ages 15 to 20 were killed in car crashes in the United States and another 228,000 were injured. Also in 2008, nearly 12 percent, or 5,864, of the 50,186 drivers involved in crashes that resulted in the loss of life were between 15 and 20 years old. And 14 percent, or 1.4 million, of the 10 million drivers involved in crashes reported by police were young drivers.

In New York state, there were 61 deaths in 2008 involving drivers between ages 15 and 20, and 47 deaths of passengers in vehicles driven by 15- to 20-year-olds, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Association.

THE AGE a person can get a learner's permit varies from state to state. In 13 states — including Alaska, Texas, Nebraska, Wyoming and Georgia — permits can be issued to persons as young as 14. Another 21 states — including Alabama, Florida, Maine, Vermont and California — issue learner's permits to persons as young as 15.

New York is among only eight states and the District of Columbia that require a person be 16 to get a learner's permit.

“PUTTING A young person in a vehicle without proper preparation is dangerous,” said state Assemblyman Marc Molinaro, who voted in favor of the new legislation. “We know that for teenagers in particular, it's a bit of a challenge to get behind the wheel, and we want to give them as much experience as we can.”

Molinaro, R-Red Hook, who was 17 when he got his license, said he probably wasn't as well prepared as he should have been when he first got behind the wheel of a car.

“But it wasn't the state of New York's fault,” he said. “I met the requirements at the time.”

The new requirements, he said, provide “a basic standard we think will adequately prepare young people.”

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