

## Clarion Ledger Article 8-6-00

One of my legislative initiatives will be a major contribution to safety on Mississippi's roadways. That initiative comes in the form of a graduated driver license system, which was made during the recent legislative session.

Mississippi's young drivers are over represented in traffic deaths and arrests for driving under the influence (DUI) of alcohol and other drugs. The graduated drivers license system will help young drivers to gain experience and learn the importance of safety under the watchful eyes of adults. It also will help to ensure the Department of Public Safety that the youth has reached a satisfactory level of competence.

Under the system, individuals who have reached the age of 15, after passing a written test and meeting basic physical requirements, are eligible for a learner's permit, which allows them to operate a motor vehicle when accompanied by a licensed driver of at least 21 years of age. The young driver will have this permit for six months unless he or she is convicted of a moving traffic violation or DUI. If convicted of any of these offenses, the individual must drive under the rules of the learner's permit for an additional six months.

Once a driver has successfully completed the six-month learner's permit period, he or she is eligible for an intermediate license, which limits unsupervised driving to the period between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. This license is also for six months.

Unless the young driver is convicted of a moving traffic violation or DUI, in this six-month period, he or she is eligible for a regular license. If a conviction occurs, the driver must drive under the rules of the intermediate license for another six months.

I urge every adult, riding with a graduated licensed driver, to emphasize the importance of using safety belts, never consuming alcoholic beverages or other mind-altering drugs before or during the operation of a motor vehicle and to obey all traffic safety rules. Of course, all young people should be aware that it is unlawful to consume alcoholic beverages at any time in Mississippi until they reach the age of 21.

Young drivers also should understand that moving traffic and DUI laws were created after careful study of what's safe and what's unsafe. Obeying these laws saves lives of the young driver as well as passengers and other motorists.

State Department of Health studies, 1996 through 1998, indicated that 88.2 percent of all accidental deaths of individuals in the 15 to 20 age category were traffic fatalities. Approximately 25 percent of these fatalities were alcohol related. Unfortunately, those under the age of 21 have found that it's relatively easy to obtain alcoholic beverages. A sampling of 684 retail outlets by Alcohol Beverage Control agents and Criminal Investigation Bureau representatives found that 36 percent of these outlets made illegal sales to minors. To help retailers recognize minors and curtail driver license altering, the

Department of Public Safety will be issuing vertical rather than the typical horizontal licenses to drivers under 21 years of age later this month.

These steps will ensure safer driving by our young people can play an important role in reducing the hundreds of deaths and injuries occurring on Mississippi roadways, but, in the final analysis, the greatest impact will be made by motorists all ages giving safety the high priority it deserves.