

# STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

## ADVOCATES PUSH ANEW FOR DRIVER BAN ON HANDHELD DEVICES

By Andy Metzger

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, APRIL 13, 2017....A fatal distraction behind the wheel of a fast-moving car can occur in the time it took you to read this sentence.

"Five seconds is the average time a driver's eyes are taken off the road while reading or sending a text message," Sen. Kathleen O'Connor Ives told her colleagues on the Transportation Committee on Wednesday. "At 55 miles per hour, those five seconds are enough to cover the length of a football field."

The Newburyport Democrat said 3,000 people are killed annually by distracted drivers and urged lawmakers to advance legislation requiring drivers to use of hands-free devices when using a mobile phone.

O'Connor Ives said the restriction would make it easier for police to enforce the 2010 law banning texting while driving, which has not been met with total compliance. Last year the Senate passed a bill banning the use of handheld cell phones and other electronic devices while driving except in emergencies and the bill made progress in the House before stalling out there.

On Wednesday, Norwood resident Tom Brannelly spoke haltingly as he recounted how his daughter Katie and two of her friends were struck while crossing the street in her hometown in 2012 by a 25-year-old driver that he said had been texting.

Pausing occasionally to collect himself, Brannelly recounted the ordeal of rushing to the hospital, sitting with his daughter through months of recovery from her traumatic brain injury, and then receiving word that she had died right before he expected her to return to Norwood for care closer to home.

Brannelly testified before the committee in 2015 on similar legislation. A number of bills before the committee would require hands-free technology for driver cell phone use including one (H 1892) filed by Rep. William Straus, the committee's House chairman and endorsed by Boston Mayor Marty Walsh.

"We must make distracted driving socially unacceptable just as drunk driving is today," said Emily Stein, who said her father was killed by a distracted driver six years ago, when she was pregnant.

Rep. Steven Howitt, a Seekonk Republican, asked Brendan Kearney, communications director of Walk Boston and a supporter of banning drivers from using handheld devices, whether he thinks the ban should be applied to bicyclists and motorcyclists as well.

"I absolutely think so," Kearney responded. "Distraction is distraction."

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