

Parents lobby for teenage graduated drivers licenses

AUSTIN (AP) — Bill Hubbard stepped to the microphone in the crowded House committee room Monday and pointed to a trio of brightly colored charts showing teenage driving fatalities in Texas.

"Our 16-year-old daughter Emily died in a single-car accident on June 21, 1998. So as you'll note, she is one of those statistics. She is a number on one of the charts," the Dripping Springs man told lawmakers studying a bill that would create a graduated drivers license program for young drivers, giving them more supervised driving time before they get an unrestricted license.

"But we want you to know that to us, Emily is not just a statistic or a number on a chart," Hubbard said. "We hope that by moving this bill forward that all of us together can keep this tragedy from affecting other Texas families."

The bill filed by Rep. Joe Driver, R-Garland, would require an intermediate license for 16- and 17-year-old drivers. Under current law, a 16-year-old is granted an unrestricted license with just seven hours' experience behind the wheel.

Under the new graduated program, the teens would continue with a permit for an additional six months, which must include at least 50 hours of adult supervised driving, including at least 10 hours at night.

Also, teen-agers would not be allowed to drive between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. unless accompanied by a licensed driver who is at least 21. No passengers under age 21 would be able to ride with a teen-age driver, except for siblings who have received written parental permission.

Exceptions would include driving to and from work, school-related activities or a medical emergency.

Teresa Spene of Austin lost her 15-year-old daughter Jenna in a car accident last May. Her 16-year-old friend was the driver.

"If this law had been in effect then, she would have not been in the car that morning," Spene told members of the House Public Safety Committee. "There were three cars involved, six teen-agers involved. Jenna was the only one that died."

In one hand, Spene clutched a wooden-framed photograph of Jenna. In the other, the teary-eyed mother held enlarged photos of the mangled car in which her daughter died. "Please support this bill in the name of all who have died as a result of an inexperienced driver."

In 1998, the most recent year for which data is available from the U.S. Department of Transportation, 407 Texas teens were killed in auto wrecks. Another 40,000 were injured.

"The situation is just getting worse. That's why I'm here," said Driver, who choked up when talking about the bill. "Teen drivers should not pay for their lack of experience with their lives."

Teen-agers account for about 938,000, or 7 percent, of the state's total 13.4 million licensed drivers. Yet they are responsible for about 20 percent of all Texas auto accidents, according to state statistics.

"I often wonder if Jordan would be alive today had there been a graduated drivers license program in Texas," said Ronnie Coleman of Houston.

Chick magnet



Thornton Menefee, a senior poultry science major, feeds his chicks for POSC 209 Poultry Meat Production. The class hatches the eggs and raises the chickens until they reach maturity.

PATRIC SCHNEIDER/THE BATTALION

Search for helicopter, couple continues

AMARILLO (AP) — The Civil Air Patrol searched for a fourth day Monday for a helicopter crash site that could look much like someone's scattered litter from 500 feet in the air, a Texas Department of Public Safety trooper said Monday.

The Robinson R-22 helicopter that Melvin "Gene" Webb and his wife, Bobbie Sue, were flying only weighed 1,300 pounds, said DPS Trooper Wayne Beigle.

"When you take something that small and it hits the ground, it is going to be very hard to spot," he said. "It could look like someone's trash that fell over and blew away."

That's why the CAP, the DPS and sheriffs' offices from throughout the Panhandle are checking out every feasible tip they receive. When they cannot tell what something is from the air, they send in the ground troops.

On Monday, about 50 people were searching by air and another 50 on the ground for the elderly couple, who had flown to the small Panhandle town of Gruver to watch their granddaughter's "Little Dribblers" game Thursday night. The couple took off from Gruver about 9:30 p.m. Thursday to head back to Canyon, a town about 30 minutes south of Amarillo, and have not been heard from since.

"We're really optimistic that we might get something accomplished today, but we are realistic that we might not find them," Beigle said. "We're going to do everything we can to find them, but we can't keep up at this pace forever."

The search for the couple has been expanded as far south as Happy, Texas, about an hour south of Amarillo, and as far north as the Oklahoma Panhandle, Beigle said.

"Our hopes ... dim as time goes on," the trooper said. "We don't think they set it down and walked out. Right now we are looking for a crash site."

The Webbs' R-22 helicopter was expected to land at the Buffalo Airport just south of Amarillo about an hour after taking off from Gruver. Family members notified Randall County authorities about 12:45 a.m. Friday, but fog and freezing temperatures held off a search until 6 a.m.

News in Brief

Six-year-old boy killed in tractor accident

ST. HEDWIG (AP) — A 6-year-old boy died in a mower accident involving a tractor operated by his grandfather, investigators said.

Mitchell Kruse was playing in a field Sunday afternoon while his grandfather was mowing with a tractor equipped with a shredder. Authorities believe the man did not see the child in the thick grass.

"As the grandfather went around to make another pass, the little boy apparently was hiding in some of the thick grass, and he did not get seen by the grandfather and the

grandfather ran over him," said Bexar County Sheriff's Deputy Paul Rodriguez. The boy was pronounced dead at the scene.

St. Hedwig is about 10 miles east of San Antonio.

Minister prompts vote about 16-year amnesia

DALLAS (AP) — The future of a Dallas minister will be decided by his congregation this week as some members voice doubt in the saga he tells of a 16-year-old disappearance and amnesia.

The Rev. James Simmons, who requested

the Friday vote, has said he will not take the pulpit until at least two-thirds of the congregation affirms him.

Simmons, formerly known as Barre Cox, says he was beaten in 1984 and awoke from a coma hundreds of miles from home with no memory of his wife, his 6-month-old daughter or his job as a youth minister at a prominent San Antonio church.

In December, he was giving an audition sermon at White Rock Community Church — a predominantly gay and lesbian congregation — when a former acquaintance recognized him and had a friend put Simmons in touch with his family.

Harris County jailer dies in I-10 freeway collision

HOUSTON (AP) — A jailer with the Harris County Sheriff's Department was killed when a van traveling the wrong way on Interstate 10 slammed into his car head-on, police said.

Jason Hain, 26, was dead at the scene Sunday after 9 p.m. He was headed inbound on his way to work when a commercial van struck his Honda Civic near the Shepherd Drive exit, about three miles west of downtown.

The driver of the van, whose name was not released, was in critical condition Monday at Ben Taub General Hospital.

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