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Department of Public Safety
Bureau of Highway Safety
164 State House Station
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Commissioner

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Testimony of Director Lauren V. Stewart

TESTIMONY OPPOSED TO LD 1480: An Act Regarding Exceptions for Persons Learning to Drive Who Have Not Yet Completed a Driver Education Course

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation, I am Lauren Stewart, Director of the Bureau of Highway Safety in the Department of Public Safety. I am here today to testify on behalf of the Department in Opposition to LD 1480.

Currently in Maine, someone seeking a permit to drive must be at least 15 years of age. If under 18 years of age they must complete an approved driver education course and successfully complete a written exam. A learner's permit allows a person to operate a motor vehicle when accompanied by an approved driver.

LD1480 seeks to create an exception to the law by eliminating the need for someone 15 ½ years of age, but not yet 18, to receive a permit to drive without completion of the approved driver education course by just allowing a permit based on successfully passing the written knowledge test. This learner's permit, issued to a person who is 15 ½ years of age, under the bill requires a permittee to be accompanied by the permittee's parent or guardian or another responsible adult who is licensed to operate the class of vehicle operated by the permittee, and has held a license for at least 2 years and is at least 25 years of age. The accompanying operator would be responsible for *any* violation of motor vehicle and traffic laws by the permittee.

The bill also allows a person who is at least 18 years of age and who completes a driver education course that includes only classroom instruction through an adult education program to apply for or be issued a learner's permit upon successful completion of the course. It does not speak to whether the adult education program is taught by licensed and certified driver education instructors using the approved driver education curriculum.

Loosening new driver education during a time when we continue to experience marked increases in traffic crashes and fatalities causes us some concern. The driver education rules and requirements currently in place are designed to protect the young driver and all other road users, by ensuring that permittees know basic road rules and have some experience with an approved instructor behind the wheel before being allowed to drive a vehicle with family members or other approved license holders. While well-meaning, these accompanying drivers may not have the skills necessary to teach those basic rules of the road and will not be able to intervene when or if

Buckle Up. Drive Safely.



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needed. Our current regulations were put in place to combat the increase in young driver crashes resulting in serious injury and fatalities. Unintentional injuries, particularly motor vehicle crashes continue to be a major cause of death for young adults. In the five years between 2020 and 2024, there were 14,846 crashes involving drivers between the ages of 15 and 18. Of those, 21 resulted in fatalities, 1,549 resulted in injuries and serious and incapacitating injuries, 2,094 resulted in possible injury, and 11,182 were property damage only.

We are not certain what is driving this exception, but following the social distancing during COVID, there is little information that indicates that students are waiting an exorbitant or unusual amount of time to get into an approved driver education course, which would necessitate permitting without full instruction.

For these reasons, we oppose LD 1480, and I thank you for your time today and I would be happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

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