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## News Column - April is National Distracted Driving Awareness Month

While distractions affect drivers of all ages, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has found that hand-held cell phone use is highest among 16- to 24-year-olds. This age group has the largest proportion of drivers who were distracted. In Texas, 46 percent of urban teens and 52 percent of rural teens talk on a cell phone while driving, and nearly the same percentage text while driving. (Texas A&M Transportation Institute). A recent study by AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety shows that distracted driving among teens was a factor in nearly 6 out of 10 moderate-to-severe teen crashes. This is much higher than the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's previous estimate that distraction is involved in 14% of teen crashes.

Video recorders in the teen's vehicles allowed researchers to analyze nearly 1,700 videos and the six seconds leading up to a crash. The videos showed that distraction was a factor in 58 percent of all crashes studied, including 89 percent of road-departure crashes and 76 percent of rear-end crashes. The leading distraction for the teens was interacting with other passengers in the vehicle while the next most common distraction was the use of a cell phone. Distracted driving along with a teen's inexperience as a driver can be a deadly combination.

Research shows that parents play an important role in increasing their teen's driving skills, as they have the greatest influence over their teen's behavior. In fact, leading experts believe parents play a key role in preventing teen car crashes and deaths. Teens with parents who set rules, monitor their driving, and are supportive are half as likely to crash and twice as likely to use seat belts as teens with less involved parents.

The Texas Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) law is designed to prevent cell phone use as well as limit the number of teen passengers that can legally ride with a novice driver and provides parents with the controls to help keep their teen drivers safe. Many parents, however, are not aware of the provisions of this law, which is divided into two phases. Making sure your teen follows the GDL law can help get a teen safely through the most critical time when driver inexperience can lead to crashes.

April is National Distracted Driving Awareness Month, and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is launching the *Talk. Text. Crash.* campaign to raise awareness of the dangers associated with distracted driving and to encourage Texas teens as well as adults to put down their cell phones while driving.

The *Talk. Text. Crash.* campaign aims to reduce distracted driving, not only for National Distracted Driving Awareness Month, but throughout the year. Texas A&M AgriLife Extension-Rusk County, reminds drivers to put away their cell phones and wait until they arrive at their destination to use their phone. Although cell phone use is the most easily recognized distraction, all in-vehicle distractions are unsafe and can cause crashes or fatalities. Keep your eyes on the road and arrive alive!

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