

# 3rd Place Driver Safety Scholarship Essay: William Talbert

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"On my way." Three words. Three simple words that can end a life in seconds. When spoken, these three words are harmless, but if sent by a driver through a text message, they become a weapon. To be exact, these words carry a risk 23 times greater than that of undistracted driving, according to the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute. This risk is taken on by about 34% of teens and 27% of adults. In 2011, the Governors Highway Safety Association met to discuss the measures that must be taken to prevent texting while driving, and came up with a three-step plan. I believe that effective implementation of this plan, along with perseverance among those who are implementing the plan, will lead to a dramatic reduction in those who are taking the risk, and texting while driving.

The first step of the plan is to Enact a ban on texting while driving. Each state is responsible for establishing highway laws and taking the first step in the campaign against texting while driving with a statewide ban. As of December 2014, 44 states along with D.C., Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam have enacted texting bans on all drivers. Four of the remaining states have placed texting bans on young drivers, and three of the remaining states have placed texting bans on school bus drivers. Theoretically, a ban on texting while driving will appease any concerns. However, in the real world, telling citizens that they are no longer permitted to text while operating a vehicle will do little to deter them. In order to actually change their behavior, the legislation must include a subsequent set of consequences.

This brings us to the second step of the three part plan set forth by the Governors Highway Safety Association; Enforce. Enforcing the existing laws is crucial to the success of the laws themselves. States must decide how those breaking the law will be found, and what punishment they will receive. As these bans are traffic regulations, the police, both local and state, will be in charge of catching those who are texting while driving. This, however, is not an effective way to find law-breakers. In a study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, in which researchers watched vehicle traffic, less than 2% of drivers were observed texting while driving, even though 34% of adult and 27% of teen drivers admit to texting while driving frequently. If researchers are only able to witness a small fraction of texting drivers, how can police

officers, tasked with keeping citizens safe, be expected to catch enough of these drivers to make a significant difference? The answer is that they simply cannot. Most citizens will decide that, as long as they do not see a cop near by, they are in the clear. To counteract the small percentage caught, the penalty must be great enough to deter people from committing the crime in the first place. This brings up yet another issue with the enforcement of texting while driving bans. The penalty for texting while driving, especially in our home state of Alabama, is nearly negligible. According the Alabama Department of Public Safety Act 2012-291 a fine of only \$25 will be assessed to a first time offender in the state of Alabama. To some, \$25 may be enough to deter them from texting while driving. However, consumers who are willing to pay over \$500 for today's high end smartphones will most likely think little of a \$25 fine. The penalty for a second time offender is a bit higher at \$50. For a third time offender, the fine maxes out at a not so staggering \$75. For the comically unlucky soul that is caught texting while driving three separate times, I suppose he will have paid enough in fines to change his behavior, but the chances of being caught in the first place are small. The chances of a person being caught a second or third time are even smaller. The legislation passed to deter citizens from texting while driving is only as successful as its enforcement. The current enforcement, however, is not impactful enough to ensure success.

Luckily, the enforcement of the laws can be supplemented with the third part of the Governors Highway Safety Association plan: implement. This step involves the implementation of programs to educate the public about the dangers of distracted driving. Everyone must be aware of the laws that have been set and the dangers of texting while driving. This final step in the three part plan is a responsibility of the government, as well as large corporations and public figures. The government holds the primary responsibility for educating citizens on the legislation it has put in place. The law does no good for citizens or the government if it is not understood by the citizens. After understanding the law, citizens must understand the dangers of texting while driving. Programs like the "It Can Wait" campaign, put forward by AT&T, has successfully transferred the dangers of texting while driving to millions of people through internet videos and television commercials. These advertisements depict the story of teenagers and young adults who have been the center of tragic accidents caused by texting while driving. Some are siblings of deceased teens, who sent the text that was read before the fatal accident. Others are drivers who had tried to send a text before crashing into oncoming traffic, leading to the death of a passenger. Public figures hold the responsibility of setting an example for the everyday citizen. Those who are looked up to and seen by millions each day must join together and send a clear message to the public that texting while driving is not acceptable.

The everyday citizen holds the most important responsibility, choosing not to text while driving. No matter how many commercials you see, how many laws your home state passes, or how many tickets you receive from police officers, the person who sends the text is you. The person who swerves off the road while reading a message is you. The person who ends a life in a split second is you. The three-step plan can tell you not to text while driving and punish you if you do, but you are the one that can end it.