

Howard Talks Tech

Driving Drowsy Could Land You in Jail

Driving While Sleepy at the Wheel Isn't Just Dangerous, It's Illegal in New Jersey



Oct. 1, 2003 NJ passed the nation's first law that specifically named driving while drowsy as a criminal offense. But experts say driver fatigue is increasingly viewed as a criminal offense in courtrooms across the country under existing reckless driving and vehicular homicide laws.

"What's driving this is a recognition that has been building in the research community for many years and has finally made both enforcement officials aware that sleep deprivation and drowsy driving is a **pervasive public health problem** that has gone generally unrecognized," says Gerald Donaldson, senior research director at Advocates for Highway Safety. Donaldson says they hope New Jersey's "Maggie's Law" will spur a public debate on the issue of drowsy driving and help people become more aware of the seriousness of the problem.

"Maggie's Law"

Maggie's Law states that a sleep-deprived driver qualifies as a reckless driver who can be convicted of vehicular homicide. It's named in honor of a 20-year-old college student, Maggie McDonnell, who was killed when a driver -- who admitted he hadn't slept for 30 hours and had been using drugs -- crossed three lanes of traffic and struck her car head-on in 1997. The driver received only a suspended jail sentence and a \$200 fine.

Drowsy Driving Is Reckless Driving

Experts say driving drowsy is generally considered reckless driving, much like driving under the influence. In fact, researchers say driving while drowsy has the same hazardous effects on driving skills as driving under the influence, such as:

- Impairs judgment Drowsy drivers often miss road signs or stoplights and misjudge distances.
- Slows reaction time. Sleepiness makes it harder to react to events going on around you.
- Impairs coordination. Drowsy drivers can't handle a vehicle as they normally would.
- Increases aggressiveness. Tired, cranky drivers often react differently to other drivers and may be more prone to road rage and speeding.

A recent survey from the National Sleep Foundation shows that about 50% of adult drivers say they have driven a vehicle while feeling drowsy in the past year. Stay awake y'all.