

## **Girl becomes teen driving statistic**

By Brian Hicks

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When she got her permit on Monday, Cushire Akabidavis had license to drive on some of the most dangerous roads in the nation, governed by a state with some of the weakest teen driving laws.

Within minutes she became another young victim of that volatile mix.

Drivers between the ages of 15 and 17 were involved in 64 traffic fatalities and more than 8,400 injuries in 2006, according to a study by the motorist club AAA.

Those accidents cost taxpayers \$629 million, roughly the price of the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge.

"South Carolina is in the top three worst states in the country for driving, and they have some of the worst laws in dealing with teen driving," said Tom Crosby, vice president for communications at AAA Carolinas.

"This is the state that would not even pass a law to prevent teens from texting while driving."

Many states restrict how many people can be in a car with a teen driver, Crosby said. North Carolina doesn't issue permits until a driver is 16 and only allows a licensed driver, supposedly a parent, who is over 21 in the car with a learning driver.  
Cost of teen crashes

South Carolina is one of several states that issue permits at 15 and require only that another licensed driver be in the car. Ten years ago, the state went to a graduated driver licensing system that requires motorists to have a beginner's permit for at least six months and do 40 hours of driving practice with a parent, part of that at night.

But many folks say that is not enough.

"I think that 15- and 16-year-olds need more training before we turn them loose and put them behind the wheel," said Sen. Joel Lourie, D-Columbia.

A survival course developed by the National Safety Council designed to prevent automobile crashes

Lourie is the sponsor of legislation that would require anyone getting a learner's permit to pass a defensive driving course approved by the Department of Public Safety. The bill passed the Senate last month and is now awaiting attention in a House committee.

Lourie got the idea from the National Safety Council, which runs a program called "Alive at 25." Several schools in the Midlands require their driving students to take the course before they can get a parking permit.

Brooke Russell, executive director of the South Carolina National Safety Council, said the course helps students learn the behavior of driving, more than the mechanics.

"There aren't many kids who don't know how to use a turn signal or stop at a stop sign, but they don't know how to handle distractions — cell phones, peer pressure," she said.

Russell said one Columbia area school, Dutch Fork High, has had at least two traffic fatalities a year among its student body since it opened. But this year, with the Alive at 25 program in place, the school has not lost any students to traffic accidents.

Russell said some Lowcountry schools have inquired about the program, but none have signed up.

Allison Dean Love, executive director of the South Carolina Insurance News Service, said that two years ago, 6.7 percent of the state's licensed drivers were teenagers, but they accounted for 12.7 percent of accidents. It's no coincidence that insurance rates are higher for drivers under 25.

The problem with teenaged drivers, Love said, is experience, or the lack thereof.