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Distracted US drivers 'a menace'

The top US transport official has said that people driving while distracted - including by making phone calls and texting - are a "menace to society".



Ray LaHood says the problem of "distracted driving" is growing

Speaking at a summit on "distracted driving", Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood described it as an epidemic.

The Obama administration says nearly 6,000 people were killed and more than 500,000 injured last year in crashes involving drivers who were distracted.

Transport officials are looking at new measures to curb phone use by drivers.

Research suggests texting and making mobile phone calls are a major cause of driver distraction.

Mr LaHood said the use of devices such as BlackBerries and iPods was also a problem, and highlighted the dangers of drivers trying to carry out other tasks while at the wheel.

"Greg Zaffke from Chicago lost his mother when a driver who was painting her nails said she never saw the red light at the intersection," he told the two-day summit in the capital, Washington.

"We need a combination of strong laws, tough enforcement and ongoing public education to make a difference"

Ray LaHood
Transportation Secretary

Mr LaHood warned that the drivers of public buses, including those carrying schoolchildren, were also driving distracted "every day of the week".

The government needed to learn from previous efforts to encourage seatbelt use and cut drunken driving as it sought to tackle the problem, he added.

"We need a combination of strong laws, tough enforcement and ongoing public education to make a difference," he said.

Senator Charles Schumer, who will address the summit, and other Democrats introduced legislation in July that, if passed, would require states to ban texting or e-mailing by drivers of a moving vehicle or lose a quarter of their annual federal highway funding.

A number of US states have already barred texting and talking on a mobile phone while driving.

In the UK, using a hand-held phone while driving became illegal in 2003.

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