



## Heads up for state laws

### 2 dozen pieces of legislation take effect today

BY ANDREW LARSON REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

If your New Year's resolution is to stop texting while driving, the state legislature is offering some motivation.

A state law that increases the fine for distracted driving by 20 to 25 percent takes effect today. It's one of two dozen pieces of legislation scheduled to be implemented on the first day of 2014.

The fine for drivers caught using a cell phone or "engaging in any activity that interferes with a vehicle's safe operation" increases from \$125 for a first-time offense to \$150. The fine for the third and any subsequent offence increases from \$400 to \$500.

"Connecticut is saying to residents, 'This is serious and we're going to treat these violations with severe penalties' because that's what they deserve," said Sherry Chapman, founder and president of Mourning Parents Act.

Advocates say heavier fines will help deter distracted driving, but changing the behavior of people constantly tied to their cell phones may require a cultural shift.

"Ultimately when you're talking about a cure, it's about changing the lifestyle of being glued to electronic devices and multitasking all day long," said Kevin Nursick, spokesman for the Department of Transportation.

In another attempt to make the roads safer, the General Assembly passed a law requiring truck drivers to remove ice and snow from their vehicles. If they don't comply, they face a \$75 fine.

Drivers of noncommercial vehicles have been required to remove ice and snow since 2010, but commercial operators were exempt.

The delay gave the trucking industry time to devise methods for drivers to scrape snow off their trailers, said Mike Riley, president of the Motor Transportation Association of Connecticut. His organization sells truck roof rakes for \$150.

"I think the ultimate solution to this will have to be produced by the makers of the trailers, something that's on board, be it heat or coating or some sort mechanical device that takes the snow off the box of trucks," Riley said. As more states pass laws requiring truck drivers to remove ice and snow, he believes manufacturers will take notice.

Other laws that take effect today are intended to make tasks such as voting and refilling prescriptions more efficient. One bill requires the

Secretary of the State to establish a system for voters to register online.

Another law requires health insurance companies to cover early prescription refills to allow patients to synchronize their refills and reduce trips to the pharmacy.

State Sen. Joe Markley, R-16th District, is reluctant to criticize measures aimed at making people's lives easier, but he warns of the risk of creating too many laws.

"A pharmacist ought to be able to work out (refills) without having a law preventing him from doing something that makes sense or requiring him to do something that makes sense," Markley said.

One of the most obscure new laws creates a task force to study whether to allow funeral homes to serve food and nonalcoholic beverages. Currently, the Department of Health forbids food and drink in funeral homes.

Another bill increases the minimum wage 45 cents, from \$8.25 to \$8.70. In 2015, the minimum wage will increase another 30 cents.

Supporters argued that raising the minimum wage improves the standard of living of people at the bottom of the pay scale and boosts the overall economy. However, it also creates an incentive for companies to downsize, said Peter Gioia, an economist with the Connecticut Business and Industry Association, which opposed the legislation.

"Companies are not going to pay people they do not feel are worth the minimum rate of pay, so ultimately this does lead to fewer people being employed," Gioia said.