Between 4,000 and 8,000 crashes related to distracted driving occur daily in the U.S. — comprising as much as 50 percent of the 6 million U.S. crashes reported annually, according to the American Automobile Association (AAA).

Since business-related travel accounts for a certain percentage of U.S. road traffic, crashes related to driver distraction can present hefty corporate liability risks and costs. According to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 2000 figures (the latest available), employers pay an estimated $24,536 in costs per crash occurring during on-the-job driving.

While driving distractions range from cell phone use to reading while driving, the results of a study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) released July 27 prompted government officials across the country to take action against driving while texting (DWT). Within one week of the study’s release, which revealed truck and heavy-vehicle drivers who text message while driving are 23.2 times more likely to get into an accident, several states approved legislation outlawing the practice. Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Oregon are the latest states to jump on the anti-texting bandwagon this year.

By January 2010, the number of states banning driving while texting will total 17,
While using cell phones in general greatly contributes to vehicle accidents, driving while texting (DWT) poses a higher risk than just talking on the phone while driving.

By Grace Lauron

along with the District of Columbia. (See chart on page 20 for current state cell phone laws). Washington was the first state to enact a DWT ban in 2007. Currently, one in four Americans admit to texting while driving, based on a May survey by mobile voice application provider Vlingo.

Keep Your Eyes on the Road
While not condoning the practice, studies have shown that talking on a cell phone is less dangerous than text messaging — mainly because talking does not require looking at the cell phone. In contrast, when sending or reading a text message, drivers take their eyes off the road ahead to type out or view a response.

Similarly, VTTI’s research revealed other instances of distracted driving in which drivers are not staring ahead, such as dialing a cell phone, also make truck and heavy-vehicle drivers 5.9 times more likely of becoming involved in a crash or near-crash as a non-distracted driver. Using an iPod — which also diverts individuals’ attention from the road when selecting songs or playlists — causes drivers to leave their lanes 10 percent more often, according to a 2007 study by Clemson University.

Taking Action Against Texting
The U.S. Department of Transportation announced plans Aug. 4 to hold a summit in September addressing the dangers of text-messaging and other distractions behind the wheel. As of press time, senior transportation officials, elected officials, safety advocates, law enforcement representatives, and academics were scheduled to convene in Washington, D.C., to discuss ideas about how to combat distracted driving.

In addition, the U.S. Senate introduced a new bill July 29 that would force states to pass laws to prohibit messaging in vehicles or risk losing 25 percent of their annual federal highway funding. The new legislation would also set deadlines for DOT regulators to come up with minimum penalties for states to implement. States would have two years to enact their own laws.

Telecommunications company Verizon Wireless, which has supported statewide hands-free driving laws as early as 2000, said it backs the senate bill. Dave Williams, Verizon’s New York region manager fleet operations, said he is in full agreement with the company’s position to ban texting while driving, especially because of the associated maintenance expense.

“Obviously, a vehicle accident with another vehicle is a major concern, but it’s been a year since it was discovered the engineer operating the Metrolink commuter train — which collided with a freight train in Chatsworth, Calif., killing 25 and injuring 135 others — had been sending and receiving text messages while on duty. Several other accidents involving driving while texting have since made headlines in 2009.

April: A California woman who crashed into a line of stopped vehicles while text-messaging in 2007 was sentenced to six years in prison for killing one of the passengers.

May: Forty-nine people were injured when a Boston trolley operator texting his girlfriend rear-ended another trolley stopped between two underground stations. The operator, reportedly fired a week after the crash, was indicted under a Massachusetts law.

July: A New York tow truck driver using two cell phones — talking on one and texting on the other — crashed into a stopped car, injuring a woman and child, and then proceeded to drive through a fence and sideswipe a house, before finally ending up in a swimming pool. He was reportedly charged with reckless driving, talking on a cell phone, and following too closely.
what is not being considered are the near-
misses that occur as well as hitting objects
in the road [as a result of driving distract-
tion],” Williams explained.

Potholes, striking the curb, striking ob-
jects in the street, going off the road, etc., all
contribute to damage to front-end compo-
nents, possibly affecting the vehicle alignment
and causing premature tire wear and
even damage to the tire itself.
“The more we can keep the driver fo-
cused on driving, the less it will cost to
maintain the vehicle,” said Williams.

Verizon Business was listed as one of the Top 10 Communication fleets in Au-
tomotive Fleet’s 2009 Fact Book, based
on size, with a reported 1,919 vehicles
in its fleet operations.

Pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca US
prohibits all use of electronic devices
while driving and holds sales reps driv-
ing company cars accountable through
written testing on safety policies.

Industry experts advocate fleets create
solid policies to reduce driver distractions
and secure risk and HR departments’ co-
operation to address driver issues. [AF

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{States} & \textbf{Text Messaging Ban} & \textbf{Statewide Handheld Cell Phone Ban} & \textbf{Teen Driver Ban on Cell Phone Use} & \textbf{Distracted/ Negligent Driving} \\
\hline
Alaska & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Arkansas & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
California & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Colorado & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Connecticut & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
District of Columbia & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Illinois & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Indiana & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Kansas & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Louisiana & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Maine & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Maryland & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Massachusetts & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Michigan & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Minnesota & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Mississippi & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Montana & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Nebraska & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
New Hampshire & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
New Jersey & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
New Mexico & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
New York & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
North Carolina & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Ohio & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Oregon & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Rhode Island & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Tennessee & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Texas & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Utah & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Virginia & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
Washington & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
West Virginia & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ & ✔ \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{State-by-State Distracted Driving Laws}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{1} Arkansas’ text messaging ban and teen driver ban on cell phones take effect October 1, 2009. The teen driver ban also prohibits drivers age 18-21 from using handheld wireless devices.

\textsuperscript{2} In California, rental cars must be equipped with safe operating instructions for cell phones.

\textsuperscript{3} In Arkansas, Colorado, Louisiana, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon, Virginia, and West Virginia, the teen driver cell phone ban is secondarily enforced.

\textsuperscript{4} Colorado’s text messaging ban effective December 1, 2009.

\textsuperscript{5} In Chicago, Illinois, drivers are banned from using hand-held cell phones.

\textsuperscript{6} Indiana’s teen driver cell ban effective July 1, 2009.

\textsuperscript{7} Kansas’ teen driver cell ban effective January 1, 2010.

\textsuperscript{8} In Massachusetts, cell phone use is permitted as long as it does not interfere with the operation of motor vehicle. The driver must also keep one hand on the steering wheel at all times; first-time fines for violating these laws range from $30 to $100.

\textsuperscript{9} In Detroit, Michigan and Santa Fe, New Mexico, drivers are banned from using hand-held cell phones.

\textsuperscript{10} In Missoula, Montana; and Broome, Dutchess, Monroe, Nassau, Onondaga, Suffolk, and Westchester Counties, New York, text messaging while driving is prohibited.

\textsuperscript{11} In New Hampshire, drivers are accountable for distractions that contribute to a crash. Motorists can be fined $250 to $1000.

\textsuperscript{12} In New Jersey, the hand-held cell phone and text messaging ban for drivers is secondarily enforced.

\textsuperscript{13} North Carolina’s text messaging ban takes effect December 1, 2009.

\textsuperscript{14} In Brooklyn, North Olmstead and Walton Hills, Ohio, drivers are banned from using hand-held cell phones.

\textsuperscript{15} Maryland’s text messaging ban takes effect October 1, 2009.

\textsuperscript{16} Utah also has a law against careless driving, for which a person can be charged if they commit a moving violation other than speeding while using a hand-held cell phone or engaging in other distracting activities.

\textsuperscript{17} In Colorado, Louisiana, and Washington, the text messaging bans are secondarily enforced.

\textbf{Source:} AAA Public Affairs; PublicAffAIRS@nAtionAl.AAA.com; August 7, 2009