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Group urges stronger seatbelt, helmet laws

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A national coalition promoting highway safety is again urging Colorado lawmakers to pass a primary enforcement seatbelt law as well as a measure that would mandate helmet use by all motorcycle riders.

Advocates for Highway & Auto Safety, which includes insurance, consumer, health, safety and law enforcement organizations, is encouraging the states to adopt 15 basic traffic safety laws, including the seatbelt and helmet measures.

States, including Colorado, typically have some, but not all of the 15 laws on the books.

Others in the roster of "model" safety laws include those mandating booster seats for children; various graduated driver's license measures for teen drivers; laws relating to impaired driving, including open container restrictions, blood-alcohol concentration testing and ignition interlock devices for vehicles of convicted drunk driving offenders; and a text

messaging restriction for all drivers.

Passage of a primary seatbelt law in Colorado would allow police to stop and cite a motorist for not wearing a belt. Seatbelt enforcement currently is a secondary offense, meaning an officer can only cite a driver for being unbelted if the motorist is stopped for another infraction.

Earlier efforts to pass primary seatbelt enforcement have failed.

No bill to strengthen seatbelt or helmet enforcement has been introduced yet in the current session.

Colorado's current motorcycle helmet rule requires operators and passengers on motorcycles to wear helmets if they are 17 and under.

Colorado is one of 12 states that do not have either primary seat belt enforcement or a requirement that all motorcycle riders wear helmets, according to the safety group. Others include Arizona, Idaho, Montana, North and South Dakota, Ohio, Utah and Wyoming.

The traffic safety coalition cited data showing that when states strengthen their seatbelt laws from secondary to primary enforcement, "driver death rates decline by an estimated 7 percent."

Seatbelt use typically is 10 percent to 15 percent higher when primary seatbelt enforcement is the law compared with secondary-enforcement states, the group added.

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The group said 4,462 motorcycle riders were killed and 90,000 injured in 2009 and it estimated that 732 of those killed, including 23 in Colorado, would have survived if all those riding motorcycles were required to wear helmets.

The safety organization acknowledged that 2009's total of motorcycle fatalities was down 16 percent from 2008's level.

The nation's total of 33,808 people killed in all motor vehicle accidents in 2009 was down from around 41,000 in 2007 and the safety group attributed the decline largely to the sagging economy.

Still, if states enacted all of the recommended highway safety laws, it could save them billions of dollars in avoidable Medicaid and other medical costs that arise from the care of accident victims, according to the Advocates.

The group cited a 2007 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study showing the annual cost of Colorado's motor vehicle crash injuries to the state's Medicaid budget was \$37.7 million, and an upgrade to primary seatbelt enforcement could save \$19.3 million in accident Medicaid costs over 10 years.

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