

# 511 traffic phone lines may raise crash risk

## Safe-driving groups want to park program

By Marie Skelton  
USA TODAY

Safe-driving advocates are criticizing the spread of 511 traffic information systems, saying they increase the risk that an inattentive driver will have an accident.

The Federal Highway Administration is promoting a state-based program in which drivers calling 511 can use voice-recognition technology or a touch-tone system to get real-time traffic information and avoid delays caused by accidents, weather or other factors.

In 2000, the Federal Communications Commission designated 511 as the single travel information telephone number to be made available to states and local jurisdictions. In December, Louisiana became the 28th state to implement the system, which is accessible to 36% of the U.S. population.

Though the traffic information service is also available online, some safety advocates say drivers will most likely use the phone service while driving. "The biggest irony about calling the traffic report while driving is that the majority of traffic delays are caused by crashes, so in the course of calling to check traffic, drivers will crash and cause more traffic delays," says Lisa Lewis, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Partnership for Safe Driving.

The highway administration has defended the program and cites numerous state-based 511 websites that warn motorists not to use the service while driving. An agency spokeswoman said travelers are urged to use 511 before their trips.

Driver inattention is a factor in nearly 80% of crashes and 65% of near-crashes, according to a study last year by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute. The study also revealed that cellphone use is one of the primary causes of driver inattention.

The traffic safety agency's policy on using cellphones while driving states that "cellphone use can distract drivers ... risking harm to themselves and others." Both highway safety agencies are part of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Despite the possibility that people will call the service while driving, Jonathan Adkins of the Governors Highway Safety Association says the 511 service is still a good idea. "Drivers have so many other reasons that they are calling; we're never going to stop drivers from using their cellphones while driving, but you have to use good common sense," he says.

Connecticut, New Jersey, New York and the District of Columbia ban the use of handheld phones while driving. California will bring the law into effect in 2008. Many other states restrict young drivers or bus drivers from using cellphones. And 19 legislative bills in 13 states have been introduced in 2007 aiming to restrict the use of cellphones while driving.