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PERSONAL INJURY

THE
JAN DILS
FOUNDATION

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Back-to-School Bus Safety: Protecting Kids at the Curb

Backpacks are filling up, alarm clocks are getting set earlier, and across West Virginia thousands of families are about to start their mornings the same way: standing at the end of a driveway, waiting for a yellow bus.

Here is the reassuring part. The school bus is, by a wide margin, the safest way for a child to get to school. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, students are roughly 70 times more likely to arrive safely when they ride the bus than when they travel by passenger car. Buses are built for it, with high padded seating, a reinforced frame, and a driver trained specifically to transport children.

The risk is not really on the bus. It is in the handful of feet around it, and in the behavior of everyone else on the road.

Know the Danger Zone

Safety experts use a specific term for the area immediately surrounding a stopped school bus: the danger zone. It extends about ten feet in every direction, and it is where the driver's visibility drops sharply or disappears entirely. Nationally, most school-age children who die in school-transportation-related crashes are killed outside the bus rather than inside it, and a large share of those deaths happen within that ten-foot ring.

Give children a rule they can actually remember: if you can touch the bus, you are too close. Take five giant steps.

Before the Bus Arrives

- Leave early. Five extra minutes is the difference between walking to the stop and sprinting for it.
- Wait at least six feet back from the curb, which is about three big steps, and line

up facing away from the road.

- Stay on the sidewalk or the shoulder. The street is not a waiting area. If several parents supervise the same stop, designate one adult each morning to watch the group.
- Dress for visibility. August mornings are bright, but by late fall the wait happens in the dark. Reflective tape on a backpack costs almost nothing.
- Tuck in drawstrings, dangling straps, and keychains. Loose items can catch on the handrail or in the door.

Getting On and Off

- Wait until the bus has come to a complete stop, the door is open, and the driver signals that it is safe to board.
- Use the handrail. Do not run up the steps or push past anyone. Everyone gets a seat.
- If crossing the street, walk at least ten

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Letter From Jan

The last few weeks of summer always go by faster than anyone expects, and around here

the kids are back in school!

That is where this issue starts. Our cover article breaks down back-to-school bus safety, including the ten-foot danger zone around a stopped bus where most school-transportation injuries actually happen, and exactly what West Virginia law requires of every driver who meets a bus with its lights flashing. We follow it with a guide for families sending a newly licensed teen out on the road, covering West

Virginia's graduated licensing rules and the driving contract we think every parent should sign.

We also have some good news to share. Our three free books, covering Veterans' disability benefits, Personal Injury, and Social Security, are now available at First Chapter Bookstore on Market Street in downtown Parkersburg. Stop in and pick one up.

Inside the firm, we are proud to recognize Natalie Wagner as our MVP of the Month for the steady, behind-the-scenes work that keeps cases moving. And if the return to school has your evenings running short, John Weber's Broccoli Cheddar Chicken and Noodle Casserole is a one-pot answer worth trying.

Thank you, as always, for trusting us to stand beside you. Here is to a safe and successful school year!

Jan Dils brings her expertise to issues that affect you and millions of other Americans every day. While her knowledge spans the critical areas pertaining to Personal Injury, Veterans benefits, Social Security disability benefits and related appeals and claims, her practice remains focused on people, making sure you get the right answers and results.



Community CORNER

Community Corner: Find Our Books at First Chapter Bookstore

If you find yourself on Market Street in downtown Parkersburg, stop into First Chapter Bookstore and look for our shelf.

We have three books available there, and every one of them is completely free to take home:

- A guide to veterans' disability benefits
- A guide to personal injury claims
- A guide to Social Security disability benefits

Each book covers the questions we get asked most often. What you may be entitled to, what the process actually looks like, and the mistakes that cost people their claims. There is no catch and nothing to sign up for. Whether you are just beginning to look into a claim or simply want to understand your



options before deciding what to do, take one with you.

We are grateful to First Chapter Bookstore for the shelf space, and for everything an independent bookstore brings to a downtown. While you are there, browse a little.

MVP OF THE MONTH

Natalie Wagner

Some of the most important work at a law firm never happens in a courtroom. It happens quietly, in the background, in the form of an invoice that got processed on time or a medical record that arrived before anyone had to ask twice. That is Natalie Wagner's territory, and it is why she is our MVP of the Month.

Natalie manages medical records payments and invoices, keeps cases from stalling out, and regularly helps teammates untangle problems that are not hers to solve. She handles all of it with a level of organization and accuracy that the rest of us have come to rely on more than we probably admit.

What makes her stand out is that none of it comes at the expense of how she treats people. No matter how full her plate is, Natalie is patient and genuinely kind. Whether she is answering the same question for the fifth time that week, chasing down a payment issue, or making a brand-new team member feel like they belong here, she goes out of her way.

Reliability like that is easy to take for granted precisely because it never fails. We would rather say it out loud.

Natalie, thank you for everything you do. This recognition is well deserved, and we are grateful to have you as part of the Jan Dils family!





Teen Driving Safety: Surviving the First Year Behind the Wheel



etting a driver's license may be less of a universal rite of passage than it once was, but for a sixteen-year-old it is still one of the biggest days of the year.

For the parent handing over the keys, it tends to feel a little different.

That instinct is well founded. Per mile driven, drivers aged 16 and 17 are roughly three times more likely than adults to be involved in a deadly crash. The gap has almost nothing to do with attitude and almost everything to do with experience. Recognizing a developing hazard, judging closing speed, and knowing what a car does on wet pavement are all skills that only come from time behind the wheel.

Why August Matters

AAA calls the stretch between Memorial Day and Labor Day the "100 Deadliest Days" for teen drivers, and the numbers behind the nickname are stark. More than 30 percent of fatal crashes involving teen drivers occur inside that window. Between 2015 and 2024, 7,805 people died in summertime crashes involving a teen driver, an average of about seven people per day across those 100 days.

August sits at the tail end of that period and overlaps with the return of school-zone traffic, bus routes, and early-morning commutes. It is a demanding month for a brand-new driver.

West Virginia's Graduated Licensing System

West Virginia phases teens into full driving

privileges in stages, and the restrictions are built around the two factors that most reliably raise crash risk for new drivers: passengers and darkness.

- **Level 1 (instruction permit).** Available at 15 to students enrolled in school, after a written knowledge test and a vision screening. The teen may drive between 5 a.m. and 10 p.m. with a licensed adult 21 or older in the front passenger seat, and no more than two additional non-family passengers.
- **Level 2 (intermediate license).** Available at 16, after holding the permit for at least six months without violations and completing 50 hours of supervised driving, including 10 hours at night. During the first six months at Level 2, no non-family passengers under 20 are permitted at all. During the second six months, no more than one.
- **Night driving.** Level 2 drivers need a supervising adult 21 or older between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m., with narrow exceptions for work, school activities, religious activities, and genuine emergencies.

Treat the 50-hour requirement as a floor rather than a target. Hours spent in rain, at dusk, on unfamiliar roads, and merging onto four-lane highways are worth far more than laps around a familiar neighborhood.

Habits That Actually Move the Needle

- **Practice deliberately.** Start in an empty lot until braking and steering feel automatic, then add difficulty on purpose: night, rain, hills, heavy traffic, parking garages.
- **Run the same setup routine every time.** Seat, mirrors, steering wheel, seat

belt, phone stowed out of reach. Then start the engine.

- **Never drive distracted.** Texting and handheld phone use behind the wheel are illegal in West Virginia, and the restrictions on drivers under 18 are tighter still. Earbuds and headphones are their own hazard, because they remove the ability to hear a siren or a horn.
- **Learn to park, including parallel parking.** It is genuinely difficult, and it is worth the frustration. Your bumpers will thank you.
- **Leave more following distance than feels necessary.** Three to four seconds gives a new driver time to recognize a problem before having to react to it.

What Parents Can Do

Most West Virginia schools no longer offer driver's education, and the gap has largely been filled by online courses that teach rules without teaching driving. Teaching your own child is rarely the answer either, since the emotional dynamic tends to work against both of you. A professional driving class lets a teen make normal beginner mistakes without the added pressure of disappointing a parent.

Supervision should not end the day the license arrives. Keep riding along in bad weather, after dark, and on roads your teen has not driven before, and treat those rides as coaching sessions rather than tests.

Then write a driving contract, and actually sign it. The core promise is simple: if your child ever feels they cannot safely drive, for any reason at all, you will come get them or pay for a ride, at any hour, with no questions asked and no lecture until the following day.

Most families frame that agreement around drinking, and it should certainly cover that. But it works best when it is broader than alcohol. A teen who is exhausted, caught in a storm, riding with an impaired friend, or too upset after an argument to concentrate needs the same escape hatch, and the promise only works if it is honored without consequence every single time.

Finally, model what you are asking for. Teenagers notice when a parent checks a text at a red light, and they will drive the way they have watched someone drive for sixteen years.

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Continued from cover story

feet ahead of the bus so the driver can see you, wait for the driver's signal, then look left, right, and left again.

- Never bend down to pick up something dropped near the bus. Tell the driver and let them handle it.
- Parents supervising a stop should confirm with the driver that every child is aboard before the bus pulls away.

On the Bus

- Stay seated and facing forward while the bus is moving. A sudden stop is far more dangerous to a child standing in the aisle.
- Keep backpacks in your lap or under the seat, and keep the aisle clear.
- Do not lean out of windows or reach outside the bus.
- No yelling, throwing, or roughhousing. A driver who has to turn around is a driver who is not watching the road, and there are fifty other children on board.

What West Virginia Drivers Need to Know

If you drive anywhere near a school route, this section is for you. Under West Virginia Code §17C-12-7, a driver meeting or overtaking a stopped school bus from either direction must stop when the bus's flashing warning lights are activated, and may not move again until the bus resumes motion, the lights are turned off, or the bus driver signals them forward.

The penalties are not symbolic. A first offense is a misdemeanor carrying a fine of \$500 to \$1,000, up to six months in jail, or both. The DMV suspends the driver's license for 60 days on a first offense, 180 days on a second, and a full year on a third or subsequent offense. Getting the license back requires completing a DMV-approved school bus safety and driver education course. Many buses are now equipped with stop-arm cameras as well, which means a violation can be documented

even when no officer is present.

The law is the floor, not the ceiling. A few habits go further:

- Slow down through neighborhoods during the morning and afternoon pickup windows, whether or not you see a bus.
- Assume children are present near any bus, moving or stopped. Kids are small, quick, and easy to lose behind a parked car.
- Put the phone down. At 30 miles per hour, a two-second glance covers roughly 90 feet of road.
- Watch both sides of the street, not just the side the bus is on.

It takes a village to raise a child, but it only takes a few minutes each morning to make sure every child on the route gets to school and back home safely. A driver who stops, a parent who supervises, and a student who takes five giant steps back are all doing the same job.