

## Tougher Penalties for Talking or Texting While Driving

"Some people just talk with the phone directly in front of them," said Trooper Mark O'Donnell. "At stop lights, you see people putting their heads down and they're texting or e-mailing or answering a text message." "You see it everywhere." "They're out there, they're talking, they're holding it up," said attorney Peter Pullano. But state lawmakers have cracked down hard on people who talk and drive and those who text and drive. All of July, that's included a crackdown by State Police, who are looking for violators. "We had a few cell phones today and a few texting," said Trooper Alan Horst. "Texting and driving, talking on the phone without a hands-free device has really become almost an epidemic," O'Donnell said. "That guy looked, as if he was looking down, I'm sure he had something in his hand," Horst said. The checkpoint was near an I-490 on ramp. It's just the latest effort following state legislature action which increased fines and other penalties for distracted drivers. "People are looking at it like it's no big deal, I was just on the phone, it's an innocuous crime," said Pullano. Pullano says drivers should take the new laws seriously, which also redefine distracted driving. "It does say if you have to push more than one button to make that call, you're in violation of the statute, and that's something everybody's got to be aware of." The veteran lawyer says getting out of tickets won't be any easier. "I think you're going to see a lot more violations, and a lot less mercy in the court when you get one," Pullano said. "All the sudden, as soon as they see me they'll put it right down, and the excuses start flowing," Horst said. Horst spent Thursday patrolling local expressways. Unlucky drivers found themselves on the wrong end of the tough new laws. Laws they say are designed to keep the roads safer. "We hope it deters the public, but our law enforcement aspect is to go out and educate people about texting and driving, and to enforce the laws vigorously," O'Donnell said. For one driver pulled over on 490, talking on his cell phone was only one of his problems. "You got weed in the truck? If it's a little bit it's no big deal." Horst says when the driver opened the window, he smelled something. "He admitted to having a blunt. I found another one in there." A ticket for marijuana possession was added to his even more costly ticket for a cell phone violation. A texting while driving violation now costs five points on your drivers license. That's more than most speeding tickets. "It's not just dangerous to the person who's texting and driving or talking on the phone, it's a danger to everyone around them," O'Donnell said. Critics, say the increased fines are driven by state budget woes. Those charged with enforcing the tougher cell phone laws say it's much more than that. "We hope it deters the public, but our law enforcement aspect is to go out and educate people about texting and driving, and to enforce the laws vigorously," said O'Donnell.