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Appropriations Committee

Subcommittees

Oversight Committee on Pensions

Transportation and the Environment



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Motor Vehicles - Required Equipment
Rear Occupant Alert Systems (Hot Cars Act) (HB 777) - 2026
Testimony of Delegate Ryan Spiegel – Favorable**

Chair Korman, Vice Chair Guyton, and Members of the Committee:

House Bill 777 requires passenger vehicles manufactured after October 1, 2029 to have a rear occupant alert system.

I introduced this bill in the wake of a tragic incident in my district where an infant was inadvertently left in the rear seat of a vehicle and died of overheating. This was not neglect. It was not intentional. It was a momentary failure of human memory with irreversible consequences—and it can happen to anyone.

Extensive scientific testing has shown the shocking speed with which vehicle cabin temperatures can rise *dozens* of degrees in mere minutes, even when the outdoor temperature is mild. (See attached photos of temperature tests.) The danger to infants and pets is grave.

Nationwide, an average of roughly 35 to 40 children die each year after being left in hot cars. Since tracking began in the late 1990s, more than 1,000 children in the United States have died in these entirely preventable incidents (See https://www.kidsandcars.org/document_center/download/hot-cars/Heatstroke-fact-sheet.pdf). Most of these cases involve loving, attentive parents who believed they had already dropped their child off at daycare.

Researchers have shown this happens because of a cognitive phenomenon called prospective memory failure – when routine autopilot overrides intention. When a parent deviates from a normal routine, the brain substitutes habit for awareness. In other words, the brain sincerely believes the task was completed when it was not.

This is precisely the kind of human error that technology is designed to prevent.

For years, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration studied regulatory options for rear occupant reminders, and federal rulemaking was anticipated but has stalled for years. In the absence of federal action, states have begun considering narrowly tailored, low-burden safety standards.

Most major motor vehicle manufacturers already voluntarily include an end-of-trip reminder in many or all of their new models, including manufacturers such as General Motors, Hyundai, Kia, Nissan, Toyota, Honda, Subaru, and others. I commend their investment in these systems to improve safety, and the fact that so many manufacturers are already doing this is further argument for—not against—this bill, because it demonstrates that the technology is widely available and inexpensive.

These systems are simple. They do not require cameras or sensors. They detect that a rear door was opened before a trip and display or sound a reminder to check the back seat when the engine is turned off.

The estimated cost of this feature is under \$20 per vehicle, a negligible amount in the cost of a new car and one already absorbed by much of the industry.

HB777 does not mandate a specific version of this technology. Manufacturers may use audible alerts, dashboard messages, or any comparable reminder system. It applies only to new passenger vehicles and does not apply to used vehicles already on the road.

There is a sponsor amendment drafted for the Committee's consideration, with two provisions. One clarifies the implementation date of the mandate as October 1, 2029, providing manufacturers multiple model years of runway to comply, to reduce obstacles to compliance and in recognition of the multiyear development process for new model vehicles. Additionally, in response to concerns raised by the Maryland Motor Truck Association, a second provision clarifies that the requirements apply only to vehicles weighing 10,000 pounds gross vehicle weight rating or less. Under both Maryland and federal law, commercial motor vehicles are defined as those over 10,000 pounds GVWR, meaning heavy commercial trucks are not subject to this requirement.

This bill is intentionally modest. It is not a perfect solution and will not prevent every tragedy, but it will prevent some at minimal cost using technology that already exists and is already widely deployed. It is a good first step.

Compounding the tragedies, these cases often lead to criminal prosecution even though they stem from normal brain function failure rather than recklessness, and there are documented racial and gender disparities in those prosecutions. (See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/lapo.70002>.) Prevention is the only humane policy response, which is why states such as California and New York are also considering similar legislation. Once the mistake happens, no legal outcome repairs the harm to the child or the family.

Car manufacturers argue that only the federal government should be making vehicle safety regulations. But the reality is that existing state laws in Maryland already require a variety of safety features in vehicles, including seatbelts (MD Code, Transportation § 22-412), headlights (MD Code, Transportation, § 22-203), and brakes (MD Code, Transportation, § 22-301), to name a few. And of course, California has passed several

state laws governing vehicle manufacturers. While California has a much larger vehicle market, and while manufacturers unsurprisingly find unified nationwide standards preferable, state requirements are hardly unprecedented. And in a situation like this, where the burden is minimal and the upside could save the lives of infants and pets, and where federal regulators are dragging their feet, this is clearly an appropriate, limited space for application of state law.

We regularly require seatbelts, airbags, cameras, and tire pressure monitoring systems because predictable human error exists. A reminder to check the back seat belongs in that same category.

HB777 is a simple, practical, and compassionate step to save children's lives.

I respectfully request a favorable report.



HB0777/853121/1

AMENDMENTS
PREPARED
BY THE
DEPT. OF LEGISLATIVE
SERVICES

16 FEB 26
18:46:30

BY: Delegate Spiegel

(To be offered in the Environment and Transportation Committee)

AMENDMENT TO HOUSE BILL 777

(First Reading File Bill)

On page 2, strike in their entirety lines 1 through 4, inclusive, and substitute:

“(1) MANUFACTURED OR ASSEMBLED ON OR AFTER OCTOBER 1, 2029; AND”;

in line 8, after “VEHICLE” insert **“WITH A MANUFACTURER’S GROSS VEHICLE WEIGHT RATING OF 10,000 POUNDS OR LESS”**; and strike beginning with “THAT” in line 12 down through “ADMINISTRATION” in line 14.

Temperature Display Vehicles – Maryland State Firefighters Association

(Photo Documentation - 2025)

Courtesy of the MSFA







OUTDOOR TEMPERATURE

65.9F




VEHICLE TEMPERATURE

78.1F

SAFE
KIDS
MARYLAND

Never Leave a Child
Alone in a Car

It only takes a few short minutes before a child can
become dangerously overheated in a car.
Everyone can make a difference by remembering to ACT.

-  Avoid Heatstroke
-  Create Reminders
-  Take Action

www.safekids.org

