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COMMENTARY

Opinion: Ohio fixed a safety problem. Now we have to solve the access problem.

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Ohio was right to require driver training for new drivers under 21.

The safety case is strong. Data shared at the Ohio Traffic Safety Summit showed that newly licensed 18- and 19-year-olds have higher crash rates in their first year of driving than newly licensed 16- and 17-year-olds, including higher rates of serious crashes. Training matters. Practice matters. Structure matters.

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But that is also why this issue feels more urgent now.

For years, if a young person in Ohio could not afford driver training at 16 or 17, or did not have access to a car or an instructor, there was still a fallback: wait until age 18. At that point, the state did not require a formal driver education course. A person could study, practice as best they could, and go directly to the test.

That system had a serious flaw. It allowed too many new drivers onto the road without enough instruction or supervised practice. Ohio changed the law for a valid public safety reason.

Now, however, communities are confronting the other side of that decision.

All new drivers under 21 must complete 24 hours of classroom instruction, 8 hours of behind-the-wheel training, and 50 hours of supervised practice. Those are reasonable expectations if a family has time, a vehicle, flexible work schedules, and money. But many families do not.



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In much of Ohio, driver education costs between \$500 and \$800, depending on where you live. In-car instruction appointments can also be hard to secure because there are not enough instructors. And even after the classroom portion is complete, the 50 hours of supervised practice require access to a vehicle, insurance, and an adult who is available.

For families with means, these are hurdles. For economically disadvantaged young adults, they can be deal-breakers.

That is why this matters now. Ohio fixed a safety problem, but in doing so, it also removed the one workaround many low-income young adults previously relied on. Today, if they cannot afford training or access it in a timely way, they may be blocked from getting a license at all.

And for many young adults, a driver's license is not a convenience. It is the bridge to a job, an apprenticeship, an internship, or a career-tech opportunity that can change the trajectory of their lives.

The scale of the challenge is already visible. One Northeast Ohio workforce board reported that 70% of the 16- to 24-year-olds it serves did not have a driver's license. At Cuyahoga Valley Career Center, students logged more than 84,000 hours of paid work-based learning last year and earned nearly \$1.2 million while still in school, yet only 62% of seniors graduated with a driver's license.

Those numbers should get our attention.

Ohio has already taken important steps. The state is funding instructor development, offering incentives for new instructors, providing Drive to Succeed scholarships for eligible low-income students, and building practical tools like the Road Ready Ohio app to help families log practice hours.

That work matters. But it will not be enough on its own.



Kristy Amy (Contributed photo)

What became clear at the summit is that this issue will not be solved by the state alone, and it will not be solved by schools alone. It will take local coalitions. Employers need to be at the table because they are already absorbing the cost when workers cannot reliably get to the job site. Workforce boards, nonprofits, foundations, schools, libraries, faith communities, and local governments all have a role to play.

At Road Worthy, we see every day that getting licensed is only part of the equation. A young person can complete driver training and still not be able to get to work without access to a reliable vehicle. That is why we are building a model in Northeast Ohio that connects driver training, workforce pathways, and donated road-ready cars for qualified young adults with jobs in hand.

The real opportunity in front of Ohio is bigger than driver's ed. It is whether we are willing to treat transportation access as workforce infrastructure. If we want safer roads, we have to make training accessible. If we want young people to work, we have to make mobility realistic.

The law changed for a good reason. Now the community response must catch up.

*Kristy Amy is executive director of **Road Worthy NEO**, a Northeast Ohio nonprofit working to remove transportation barriers for young adults entering the workforce.*