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To: Assembly Committee on
Transportation

From: Wendy Henderson, Policy Analyst

Re: AB 464

Date: August 16, 2007

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this legislative proposal. The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) enthusiastically supports restrictions on use of cellular phones by adolescent drivers. WCCF is a 125 year old child advocacy organization interested in ensuring that every child grows up in a just and nurturing home and community. Our child advocacy work has a significant focus on adolescent brain development and it is that research that compels us to testify on behalf of this important legislation today.

A decade ago there was little understanding of how the adolescent brain develops, and even less about how distractions effect teenage driving. Now we know more about both, and it is time to act to create a safer space for our teens to learn how to drive. Research has uncovered adolescence as a time of significant growth in the areas of decision making, impulse control and risk taking. Research has also shown that teens are less able to filter out distractions while they drive. Therefore, we support legislative limits on one of the leading distractions – cell phone usage.

A recent study by the Allstate Foundation surveyed teenagers about their attitudes toward driving. Fifty six percent of the teens they surveyed make and answer calls while they are driving. Thirty one percent identified text messaging while driving as extremely or very distracting. The study also found that teens understand the risks of driving, but many teens feel overconfident about their driving abilities, as one male teen stated, “A lot of other drivers don’t know what they are doing.”

Driving takes practice, and practice takes concentration for new drivers. Adolescent brain research shows that teenagers are undergoing massive changes in the structure of their brains. To compensate for inefficient thought processes, they have to use more brain energy for mundane tasks than adults. When asked simple questions (such as should you eat vegetables), adolescents take a long time to answer and use more parts of their brains to decide than adults given the same task.

Given the complexity of driving for a novice driver it is imperative to limit the potential distractions. Even without the distractions of cellular phones and text messaging, adolescents take more risks when they drive and are less able to judge the impact of the risks they take. We support a logical limitation on cellular phone use to ensure that Wisconsin adolescents have the opportunity to learn to drive in a distraction-free environment.