

Traffic fines increase to fund trauma centers

The state's penalties for running red lights and causing serious injuries or fatalities in traffic accidents increased on Oct. 1, providing additional money for Florida's trauma care system.

Legislators approved the changes earlier this year, making Florida one several states that have implemented "bad driver" legislation.

Motorists who run red lights will now pay \$125, up from \$60, and have four license points assessed against them, instead of three. The change is expected to generate millions of dollars in additional funding for the state's 21 trauma centers, which include Shands Jacksonville.

Drivers who cause serious injuries or fatalities in traffic accidents will have to pay \$500 for each serious injury and \$1,000 for each fatality. Proponents of the new fines estimate they will provide as much as \$4.7 million annually to support the state's trauma centers.

Funding difficulties have forced more than 30 trauma centers to close since 1985, said Rep. Andy Gardiner (R-Orlando), Florida House Majority Leader.

"It was imperative that we found a way to make sure that the remaining trauma centers stayed open and were ready to save lives," Gardiner said. "These new laws will help make that happen."

Legislators included the laws in House Bill 497, the Velez Memorial Traffic Safety Act, and HB 1697.

HB 497 increased the penalties for running red lights. It was named after two Orlando sisters, 5-year-old Anjelica Velez and 2-year-old Victoria Velez, who were struck and killed by a sport utility vehicle that police said ran a red light. HB 1697 added the fines for serious injuries and fatalities.

Proponents of the new laws pushed increased fines as an appropriate way to help trauma centers because motor vehicle crashes comprise more than 50 percent of trauma incidents in Florida.

Rising readiness costs and increasing amounts of uncompensated and/or under-compensated care are putting financial pressure on the state's trauma centers, according to The Alliance to Save Florida's Trauma Care, which includes trauma centers, advocacy organizations, patients, medical personnel, providers and concerned citizens.

In 2003, the cost for Florida's trauma centers to be prepared totaled more than \$96 million and they incurred a net loss of \$93 million including reimbursement, according to a 2005 study mandated by the 2004 Florida Legislature and conducted by the University of Florida and the University of South Florida on behalf of the Florida Department of Health.