

Committee Members,

Connecticut has lead the nation with safe boating education and the requirement for boater certification. The proposal by the CT DEEP to use online education instead of a classroom environment is a giant step backwards and should be opposed.

While there are many who believe on-line training has its merits, and it does, the introduction of on-line training for a "boater's drivers license" is just as unwise as authorizing our teens to qualify for a drivers license after a few hours staring at their laptops.

By far, in-classroom education, far exceeds the quality of current available online education. This fact is indisputable as attested to even by the DEEP. Simply put, there is no reason to support online boater education at this time. THERE IS NO REASON TO LOWER THE HIGH STANDARDS FOR CLASSROOM EDUCATION THAT PROFESSIONAL AND VOLUNTEER EDUCATORS HAVE DEVELOPED AND PERFECTED OVER THE PAST TWENTY YEARS.

In an on-line environment educators would be completely cut out of the loop to answer boater safety questions and provide hands-on instruction - or even testing. As educators, we know that the final exams we administer do not really represent the in-depth educational background that we provide our students through the 8-hour course. An example of the current proposal would allow "Jim" to take the online course for "Joe" and if Joe walks in and passes the final exam, which is not that difficult, that would be the extent of "Joe's" education, period. We also know that a percentage of students simply want to "get their license"- but as educators, having the real students actually in a classroom affords us the opportunity to truly educate the students.

The DEEP claims that they will stop offering classes to the public if an online course is available. Why haven't they done so already? Why are they connecting one topic to the other? They can easily stop offering courses directly to the public at a HUGE savings to their bottom line, but they still haven't done so. They have raised the price to obtain Certification (\$50 now) yet at the same time they have implemented a system that does not afford students the opportunity to obtain a plastic card, only a paper tag that the students print themselves. In essence, they have cut their processing expenses (though at cost to the public), yet they spend significant budget dollars paying State employees to teach boating safety courses, rather than deferring to the established base of existing Instructors in the larger boating community.

To be sure, on-line education has its place when it is integrated with classroom mentoring, and the availability of an instructor to answer questions. The approach that DEEP is taking does not include such progressive techniques, but is just a "see and click" sequence to slog through a series of static panels of text. Yes, on-line education has its place, but not at the expense of safety - our safety - our kids' safety.

When you look at the text of the changes to the law that is being proposed by HR Bill # 6541, you find that boating education is being addressed in a parallel fashion to a newly proposed online hunting safety training course!!!! How did this happen? A hunting/gun/archery-safety course will be allowed to be on-line instead of being presented by a competent firearms instructor! A computer is going to teach sportsmen how to handle weapons????? There may be some parallel between firearms and boats in the minds of DEEP here - in the way that HR Bill # 6541 has been packaged and presented. However,

making that comparison does neither interest group any good. As a concerned citizen, the thought of allowing on-line firearms/weapons training is, to me, incomprehensible.

Two years ago, when this first came up several legislators put on the record that they opposed online education and had the DEEP remove it from that proposed legislative packet. The Legislators we met at that time had taken classroom courses offered by our organizations, and they spoke, at the hearing, on the record, that they supported classroom learning when it came to boating education !!!!! Since then, it appears as if the DEEP has attempted to have this agenda for on-line courses approved through other legislative venues. In 2011, the LRRC (Legislative Regulation Review Committee) opposed this concept, and had on-line training removed from the legislative package. Now, the topic has been bundled with other proposed changes, and sent to a different committee, bypassing the LRRC.

Finally, ask the DEEP for answers as to why they haven't already stopped their own efforts at teaching classes to the public, at a loss, in effect, at the taxpayers' expense. Further, there have been no public hearings on this topic, to get the sense of the public's views on this issue, since their last attempt to push on-line training on the boating community. The last hearing was in May 2010 - and the testimony of the boating community at that hearing was ignored, and there have been no other hearings since then. I think that you should consider asking the DEEP why it hasn't gone through the same legislative route to have the regulations changed as they have last few times... ask them why they feel online education should be approved AND ASK FOR THE DATA THAT SUPPORTS THEIR INITIATIVE. Usually they say: 'BECAUSE THE PUBLIC REQUESTS IT.' WELL, SURE, THE PUBLIC WOULD LIKE FREE ICE CREAM ON WEDNESDAYS, BUT THAT DOES NOT MEAN THAT THE DEEP IS OBLIGATED TO PROVIDE IT! Nothing has changed since they presented this proposal at the public hearing two years ago - when it was opposed by everyone present.

Respectfully,  
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