

Newly arrived au pairs offered new course on driving

Martin B. Cassidy, Staff Writer
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Au pair Anais Dumont of France runs through tests wearing goggles to simulate alcohol intoxication as the Automobile Association of America and Au Pair in America team up for a program to help au pairs become better drivers at the Holiday Inn Select in Stamford, Conn., May 8, 2011. The program covered American laws regarding child seats, street signs, and alcohol intoxication. Photo: Keelin Daly / Stamford Advocate | Buy This Photo



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STAMFORD -- Fresh from Paris, 23-year-old Jennifer Lauret said she will pay special attention in the upcoming months to make sure she gives extra care to handling what she expects will be a larger automobile than she is accustomed to in her native country.

"There are many differences between the way to drive in France, and it is good to prepare," said Lauret, who will be an au pair for a New Jersey family.

Last week, 22 young women from Europe, South America, and other continents went through a full day of driver's education curriculum geared towards au pairs at the Holiday Inn Select on East Main Street.

The session was part of a new joint effort designed by Stamford-based Au Pair in America and the American Automobile Association to familiarize au pairs with new driving rules and regulations and a range of topics, from the proper operation of child safety seats, the perils of hyperthermia and hypothermia, and the consequences of drunk driving.

While experienced drivers in their native countries, Au Pair in America President Ruth Ferry said the agency sees the new class as another way to ease the young women's transition into the lives of the families who employ them.

While staying in America, families are to provide transportation to the women travelling to and from university classes, and most depend on the women to do some driving during their child-care duties.

"It's a way to keep improving the quality of the services we are providing the families," Ferry said. "The safety of the children is paramount."

Diana Diaz, an AAA instructor, had the au pairs take turns

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demonstrating the use of child safety seats, emphasizing securing safety straps correctly on a toddler to prevent injury during a crash.

The women were also warned about the legal and life consequences of driving drunk during an exercise in which they were made to wear goggles to impair their vision as they were made to complete sobriety tests.

"We want these girls to understand that there should be absolutely no drunk driving while they are visiting," said [Jean Quinn](#), deputy director for Au Pair in America, who helped design the curriculum.

Under the au pair program, young women must be provided a private room and an allowance for personal use, paid vacation, and other compensation in return for a set amount of hours of child care weekly, Ferry said.

About 65 percent of the 3,500 to 4,500 women placed by the agency are deployed to host families along the eastern seaboard from Boston

to Washington, Ferry said.

Emma Taylor, 24, who lives in North Wales, near the English border, said she is excited to join her host family in Atlanta, Ga., and begin taking care of two children, a 6-year-old boy and 3-year-old girl.

Taylor, who has worked as a legal secretary in England, said she hopes to quickly master American driving techniques, and said she will pay special attention to American regulations on U-turns.

In England, U-turns are rare, because most road systems in the United Kingdom include roundabouts to change vehicle direction.

"I also need to get used to driving on the opposite side of the road," Taylor said. "It also seems like the United States has a lot more highway signage that I will have to study and get used to."

The women are part of a larger group of 120 au pairs who will go through orientation before joining families around the U.S., Quinn said.

Over the summer, ever-larger groups of au pairs will be staying at the hotel where they will receive instruction in child development and safety from American Red Cross instructors.

"We've been doing this in Stamford for a long time and it works out very well," Quinn said. "It may seem an unlikely place to be, but the girls are able to focus on the information before they join their families."



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