

**STATEMENT OF  
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**BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON  
ENVIRONMENT & PUBLIC WORKS  
U.S. SENATE**

*Opportunities to Improve Transportation Safety*

**APRIL 14, 2010**

Chairman Boxer, Ranking Member Inhofe, and Members of the Committee, thank you for holding this hearing today to focus attention on the pressing need that faces us in the next surface transportation reauthorization legislation to pursue all possible opportunities to reduce fatalities and injuries on our Nation's highways.

Transportation safety is the Department of Transportation's (DOT) highest priority. As you know, improving highway safety requires a comprehensive, multi-agency and multi-disciplinary effort. Through the combined efforts of the DOT and the entire highway safety community, the number of traffic fatalities in 2009 is projected to be below 34,000—the lowest level since 1954. Despite these gains, too many individuals continue to be killed and injured on our Nation's highways.

As we approach reauthorization of surface transportation programs, concerted efforts to improve safety are needed for all surface transportation modes. Safety problems vary from State to State, and it is important that data-driven, performance-oriented programs be established to identify the most cost-effective strategies to improve safety in each jurisdiction. Innovation and technology will be critical to improving vehicle, operator, and infrastructure safety. Infrastructure improvements reduce the number of crashes and the severity of crashes. They are designed to work in concert with vehicle and behavioral measures to improve driver performance and diminish severity through tools such as signage, pavement friction, rumble strips, the Safety Edge, and cable median barriers. We must also explore innovative ways to reduce deaths and serious injuries caused by impaired driving, speeding, failure to wear seatbelts and motorcycle helmets, and other high risk behaviors, including distracted driving.

Secretary LaHood is personally committed to reducing the number of injuries and fatalities caused by distracted driving—a dangerous practice that has become a deadly epidemic. Our latest research shows that nearly 6,000 people died in 2008 in crashes involving a distracted driver, and more than half a million people were injured. Unless we take action now, the problem is only going to get worse. In late 2009, the Department hosted a Summit to help identify, target, and tackle the fundamental elements of this problem. We brought together over 300 experts in safety, transportation research, regulatory affairs, and law enforcement. More than 5,000 people from across the United States and a dozen countries also participated in the

Summit via the web. We also heard from several victims of this behavior whose lives have been changed forever. The unanimous conclusion of the Summit participants is that distracted driving is a serious and ongoing threat to safety.

The Administration is committed to addressing the distracted driving epidemic on a number of fronts across all modes. In October 2009, President Obama signed an Executive Order banning texting while driving for Federal employees when driving government-owned vehicles, using government-supplied electronic equipment, and driving privately-owned vehicles while on official government business. This Executive Order sends a strong, unequivocal signal to the American public that distracted driving is dangerous and unacceptable.

Education and awareness, together with strong laws and enforcement programs, are also essential elements of our action plan, which includes targeted outreach campaigns to inform key audiences about the dangers of distracted driving, and high visibility enforcement actions. DOT recently launched a national campaign called “Put it Down,” to encourage the public to get involved in ending distracted driving, and to encourage implementation of legislation and high visibility enforcement to increase consequences for distracted driving. On April 8th, Secretary LaHood announced pilot enforcement campaigns for distracted driving in Hartford, Connecticut and Syracuse, New York. These pilot programs are similar to previous efforts to curb drunk driving and increase seat belt use among drivers and represent the first federally-funded efforts in the country specifically focused on the effects of increased enforcement and public advertising on reducing distracted driving. Drivers caught texting or talking on a hand-held cell phone will be pulled over and ticketed. The message is simple: “Phone in One Hand. Ticket in the Other.” Each pilot program is supported by \$200,000 in Federal funds and matched by \$100,000 from the State. The Department will continue to work closely with stakeholders to test program strategies and collect and evaluate comprehensive distracted driving-related data needed to better understand risks and identify effective solutions.

In February of this year, Secretary LaHood unveiled another step in the campaign against distracted driving—model legislation for use by States to prohibit texting while driving. The model State law, prepared by NHTSA and a cross-section of safety and industry organizations, would authorize law enforcement officers to stop a vehicle and issue a citation to drivers who are texting while driving. This model State law is another powerful tool to help States combat this serious threat to public safety.

The Department is also taking other concrete actions such as encouraging States to install rumble strips along roads as an effective way to get the attention of distracted drivers before they deviate from their lane. On October 1, 2008, the Federal Railroad Administration issued Emergency Order 26 that severely restricts the use of personal electronic devices by railroad operating crews. While this Emergency Order is being vigorously enforced, FRA has initiated a rulemaking to obtain comments and refine the restrictions contained in the Emergency Order. DOT has also initiated rulemakings to ban text messaging and restrict the use of cell phones by truck and interstate bus operators while operating vehicles, and to disqualify school bus drivers convicted of texting while driving from maintaining their commercial driver’s licenses.

The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) significantly increased the national policy emphasis on safety and the resources available to reduce traffic fatalities and injuries on all public roads. Additionally, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 provided more than one billion dollars to implement safety and operational improvements, including hundreds of miles of rumble strips and cable median barriers. Using these resources provided for safety improvements we have made progress and seen successful results, many of which I will highlight for you today. I will also outline some opportunity areas to reduce fatalities and injuries on our Nation's highways.

## **REDUCING HIGHWAY FATALITIES**

In 2008, the number of individuals who lost their lives on the Nation's roadways fell to 37,261, equating to a fatality rate of 1.25 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT)—the lowest rate ever recorded. Occupant fatalities, including individuals killed in passenger cars, light trucks, large trucks, and buses, declined for the sixth year in a row to 26,689, the lowest annual total since 1975 when the Fatality Analysis Reporting System began collecting data. In addition, the number of individuals suffering injuries as a result of motor vehicle crashes in 2008 was the lowest total since 1988. The number of individuals killed in large truck crashes also continues to decline. In 2008, 4,229 people were killed in large truck crashes—593 less than in 2007. The number of truck occupant fatalities also declined from 805 in 2007 to 677 in 2008.

Despite the gains we have made in improving highway safety, in 2008: motorcycle rider fatalities continued their eleven-year increase, reaching 5,290; 4,378 pedestrians were killed; and, 11,773 people were killed in crashes involving an alcohol-impaired driver—about 32 percent of all motor vehicle fatalities.

These numbers are not acceptable. That is why the Department considers safety its top priority and is dedicating resources to reach its High Priority Performance goal of reducing the rate of highway fatalities to 1.13 - 1.16 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled by the end of fiscal year 2011. We will accomplish this through a variety of initiatives aimed at drivers, vehicles, improved road design, and the use of technology to improve safety. To most effectively align program and policy actions needed to meet key challenges, the Department has established four fatality sub-measures—passenger vehicles, nonoccupants (e.g., pedestrians and bicyclists), motorcycle riders, and large truck- and bus-related fatalities—which represent the breadth of all highway users. The purpose of this approach is to examine more closely the fatality rates of the various segments of highway users and develop targeted strategies to combat trends within these segments of highway users.

Some of the greatest gains in reducing fatality rates in the short term lie with influencing driver behavior. Over 90 percent of crashes involve some kind of driver error, such as speeding, alcohol and drug impairment, and driver distraction. The Department has implemented a number of driver behavior programs, including high-visibility enforcement of drunk driving and seat belt use laws, new data-driven law enforcement strategies, incentive grants for primary safety belt use laws, child passenger protection initiatives, and motorcycle safety programs. The Department also recognizes the importance of continuing to reduce the number of collisions at the Nation's approximately 225,000 highway-rail grade crossings and is dedicated to reducing

the number of highway-rail grade crossing fatalities and injuries. Although these programs have played a significant role in improving highway safety, much work remains.

## **PROGRAMS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

### ***Comprehensive Safety Programs and Partnerships***

At DOT, we are taking advantage of many opportunities for intermodal partnerships to help improve highway safety. For instance, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) have collaborated on the DOT Speed Management Strategic Initiative. Through this effort, the Department has not only worked at the national level to provide leadership for promoting effective speed management programs, but also has worked directly with States to fund speed management demonstration projects. DOT has also implemented a training program that is being delivered to States to provide guidance in setting appropriate speed limits and enforcing them.

FHWA, NHTSA, and FMCSA also have collaborated on the USDOT Traffic Records Coordinating Committee, an intermodal team that provides coordinated Federal leadership to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of integrated roadway, traffic and safety data collection and analysis. FHWA and FMCSA have supported NHTSA in the implementation of the State Traffic Safety Information System Improvement Grant program which provides grants to States to improve their data systems. FHWA, in consultation with FMCSA and NHTSA, has developed a Crash Data Improvement Program that gives States a detailed analysis of their crash data systems, training on how to make improvements, and individualized attention from data systems experts. In addition to these and other multi-modal efforts to improve safety, DOT agencies are also actively implementing safety programs within their respective jurisdictions.

FHWA has conducted Safety Summits with tribal governments in six States in coordination with the Department of Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs to address highway safety issues. In some States, the crash rates on tribal lands is disproportionately higher than other areas in the State, and these summits have been instrumental in identifying issues and mitigating strategies.

### ***Federal Highway Administration Programs***

FHWA actively pursues improved highway safety through a collaborative, multi-faceted approach that addresses the "4Es of safety"—engineering, education, enforcement, and emergency medical services. Using a data-driven approach, FHWA works with other safety agencies at DOT and with safety partners to bring cutting-edge research and technology to some key safety areas, including intersections, roadway departures, and pedestrian safety.

Highway Safety Improvement Program. SAFETEA-LU authorized the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) as a new core Federal-aid formula program and more than doubled the amount of highway safety funding for the States by authorizing \$5.1 billion over four years. The HSIP emphasizes a results-based, data-driven, strategic approach to improving

highway safety. The program provides States with flexibility to use funds for safety projects on all public roads and publicly-owned pedestrian and bicycle paths, and to focus State efforts on implementation of State Strategic Highway Safety Plans (SHSPs). FHWA took rapid and aggressive action to get guidance and information out to States and stakeholders as soon as SAFETEA-LU was signed into law. FHWA, through its Division offices, provided hands on technical assistance to the States to develop and implement their State Strategic Highway Safety Plans. All States have plans in place, as required by statute, and are implementing these plans now. The SHSP is a data-driven, multi-year comprehensive plan that establishes statewide goals, objectives, and key emphasis areas. FHWA's emphasis on a collaborative approach to improving safety is especially critical in the HSIP, where each State's SHSP addresses all "4Es" of safety described above. Also as part of the HSIP, a new High Risk Rural Roads Program was established that provides funding for construction and operational improvements on rural major or minor collectors or rural local roads. Rural two-lane, two-way road fatality rates continue to be significantly higher than the fatality rates on the Interstate. More than fifty-five percent of total highway fatalities nationwide occur on rural roads, and the fatality rate for rural crashes is more than two and one-half times greater than the fatality rate for urban crashes.

The Highways for LIFE Program. The Highways for LIFE program has provided support for training, workshops, and showcases to advance the adoption of Road Safety Audits (RSA) as a standard of practice by States and local highway agencies across the Nation. RSAs are used to identify measures to improve safety at high crash occurrence locations. Research has shown implementation of RSA recommendations lead to significant reduction of crashes. Such research has also supported the demonstration and promotion of Safety Edge, a simple, low cost, technology for adding a wedge to the edge of pavement during construction, which significantly reduces runoff the road recovery crashes due to edge drop-off.

Safe Routes to School. SAFETEA-LU authorized \$612 million over five years for a new Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program to: enable and encourage children, including those with disabilities, to walk and bicycle to school; make walking and bicycling to school safer and more appealing; and facilitate the planning, development, and implementation of projects that will improve safety, and reduce traffic, fuel consumption, and air pollution in the vicinity of schools. Working with States, FHWA moved quickly to implement this program. As of December 2009, over 6,400 schools have or will benefit from the SRTS program, and FHWA has hosted four national meetings for State SRTS Coordinators to provide training. I would also note that SRTS has been cited as an example of the type of community-based program compatible with the goals of the Administration's Livable Communities Initiative.

At Congress' direction, FHWA established and convened a Federal Advisory Committee that has studied and developed a strategy for advancing SRTS programs nationwide. The Federal Advisory Committee's report entitled "Safe Routes to School: A Transportation Legacy, A National Strategy to Increase Safety and Physical Activity among American Youth" was sent to Congress in 2008. The report included several recommendations for sustaining and improving the SRTS program. Among the recommendations, the report proposed continuing a full-time SRTS coordinator at the State level, increasing Federal funding, streamlining the compliance and assurance processes for projects under title 23, and promoting and encouraging support for SRTS

among partners. In addition, the report encouraged innovative solutions, including training for motorists and children.

Work Zone Safety. In 2008, work zone fatalities were down nearly 40 percent since 2002, with 720 work zone fatalities out of the 37,261 total fatalities that year. FHWA has made improvements to work zone safety and mobility through standardization, rulemaking and outreach. All national standards to control traffic through work zones are contained in the FHWA *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD)*. Key FHWA regulations in this area including the Work Zone Safety and Mobility Rule; the Temporary Traffic Control Devices Rule; and the Worker Visibility Rule are intended to provide safer and less disruptive work zones. Additionally, under the Work Zone Safety Training Grants Program, a total of 24 work zone related training courses have been held 946 times across the country since late 2007, and more than 23,000 individuals have been trained. A comprehensive repository of information designed to help improve work zone safety is made available under the Work Zone Safety Information Clearinghouse. In conjunction with the Highways for LIFE efforts to accelerate the adoption of innovations and new technologies, FHWA has also established a Work Zone Peer-to-Peer Program that serves as a resource to agencies looking for better methods, tools, and strategies to improve work zone safety and mobility.

Bridge Safety Efforts. The FHWA Highway Bridge Program supports State and local efforts to improve conditions, and thus safety, of highway bridges. Since its inception, the Highway Bridge Program in combination with other Federal, State, and local funding programs, has been successful in reducing bridge deficiencies. As of December 2009, there were 117,419 bridges out of 602,977 inventoried nationwide that were on the National Highway System (NHS). Of those, 25,684, or 21.9 percent, were considered deficient. That represents a reduction of 3.6 percentage points from 1999, when 33,154 out of 130,199, or 25.5 percent, of NHS bridges inventoried were deficient. When a bridge is classified as deficient, it does not mean that it is likely to collapse or that it is unsafe. Rather, a deficient bridge typically requires significant maintenance and repair to remain in service, and eventual rehabilitation or replacement is needed to address the deficiencies. Thousands of well-trained and dedicated bridge inspectors in the National Bridge Inspection Program work every day to ensure that critical safety issues for all bridges including those with deficiencies are identified and acted upon to protect the traveling public. With an aging infrastructure and limited resources, it is vitally important to continuously monitor the condition of the Nation's bridges and frequently assess the load-carrying capacity of those bridges that are showing signs of deterioration.

Safety Research, Technology, and Innovation. Developing new technologies and tools through a strong research and development program in highway safety is a key component of FHWA's strategy to reduce highway deaths and injuries. FHWA conducts its own research and collaborates extensively with others who sponsor highway safety research and technology, including States and universities. For example, FHWA is evaluating low cost safety improvements with State and local partners, and maintaining a web-based clearinghouse of available safety effectiveness information so that the information is readily available to our partners. FHWA is also using advanced crash simulation and analysis to enhance the design of median cable barriers and other roadside hardware to make roadsides safer, and we have been working on Human Centered Systems to ensure that driver responses are considered in road

design. FHWA is deploying a new generation of safety analysis software to assist States in making cost-effective safety investment decisions. FHWA is evaluating new, low-cost signing and pavement marking treatments to better manage speeds on main roads through rural communities and at horizontal curves, and to improve the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists on our roads and streets.

## **OPPORTUNITIES IN REAUTHORIZATION TO IMPROVE TRANSPORTATION SAFETY**

As long as people continue to lose their lives on our Nation's highways, DOT will remain committed to finding methods for reducing fatalities and injuries. Building on the strong foundation of safety requirements and resources provided by SAFETEA-LU, the Department sees many opportunities for improving highway safety through refocused transportation policies. Such opportunities include:

- Utilizing the DOT Safety Council, established by the Secretary under my chairmanship, which brings DOT senior leadership together to focus on the single issue of how to save lives. It operates under five guiding principles: a) providing a unified safety message, b) systematic, data-driven decision-making, c) open and frank dialog, d) transparency, and e) identification and recognition of safety action teams. Since its inception, topics the Council has addressed include new regulatory authority for FTA safety oversight authority and new metrics to track the Department's safety programs. Recently, the Committee formed two action teams to address what it considers to be high priority, cross-cutting, safety topics--safety culture and hours of service.
- Implementing a DOT Roadway Safety Plan for reducing fatalities and serious injuries on our Nation's highways and roadways. This plan will focus on coordinating the actions and initiatives of the DOT organizations and will seek to identify any gaps or opportunities where further work is needed. In this respect, the Roadway Safety Plan will have both a strategic view of roadway safety, and a performance perspective to assure that expected outcomes are identified and achieved.
- Exploring innovative ways to reduce deaths and serious injuries caused by driver inattention through initiatives such as the Distracted Driving campaign and incentivizing States to promote laws to curtail unsafe cell phone use and eliminate texting while driving.
- Focusing on the safety of all road users including pedestrians and bicyclists through the Department's Livable Communities Initiative to make communities safer for people of all ages.
- Enacting the transit safety reform bill as submitted by Secretary LaHood, on behalf of President Obama, to the Congress back in December 2009, in order to apply national, consistent safety standards to all rail transit agencies and ensure safe operation of rail transit systems that provide more than 10 billion passenger trips each year.

- Developing analyses and procedures to understand roadway departure crash causation; support better roadside safety design; evaluate infrastructure and intersection configurations to improve motorist, pedestrian, and bicyclist safety; and conduct research and deployment of best practices in safety training and management.
- Developing new tools for analyzing safety solutions, and strongly promoting proven, cost-effective steps, such as Safety Edge technology, rumble strips, and cable median barriers to help prevent roadway departures. More than fifty percent of fatal crashes involve a vehicle leaving the roadway.
- Streamlining reporting requirements contained in the HSIP and fostering greater transparency by posting the SHSPs online. Also ensuring that States periodically update and implement SHSPs.
- Ensuring continued progress in rural road safety by providing a more workable definition of “high risk rural roads” contained in the High Risk Rural Road Program to enable increased State participation.
- Improving the quality, consistency, and timeliness of work zone safety data to identify and quickly address potential safety problems.
- Working closely with tribes, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and others to address the disproportionate level of fatalities on tribal roads.
- Improving safety data to support truly data-driven decisions about project selection and improve safety performance. Continuing to assist States in improving their data quality and collection of roadway inventory data.
- Continuing the important research on IntelliDrive technologies that provide critical safety warnings to drivers alerting them of hazardous situations. By enabling smart infrastructure and advanced vehicle to vehicle communications technology, the potential exists to dramatically reduce the number of crashes, injuries, and fatalities on our roadways.

## **CONCLUSION**

This is just a preliminary view of some of the opportunities we have identified for improving transportation safety on our Nation’s highways through transportation policies that can be implemented in the next reauthorization of surface transportation programs. Be assured that safety is, and will continue to be, the Department’s top priority, and reducing highway fatalities is one of the Department’s High Priority Performance Goals. We look forward to continued work with this Committee, the States, and our partners in the transportation community to implement sound transportation policies to save lives.

Thank you and I am happy to respond to your questions.