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Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Duncan and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to discuss motor vehicle safety issues. I want to express my appreciation for this Committee's support for highway safety programs. Your leadership and support have made significant contributions to advancing the cause of highway safety and improving the quality of life in communities across the Nation.

Transportation safety is a top priority for Secretary Peters and President Bush, and our mission at NHTSA is very straightforward: to save lives and prevent injuries. In 2005, according to the Centers for Disease Control, once again motor vehicle crashes were the leading cause of death for Americans for every age 2 through 34. In 2006, more than 42,600 people lost their lives on U.S. roadways and 2.6 million were injured in vehicle crashes. The associated financial costs are staggering: over \$230 billion each year.

What makes that situation even more distressing and frustrating is that many of these deaths were preventable. Over 90 percent of crashes are caused by human factors, such as speeding, lack of seat belt use and alcohol impairment. We must aggressively continue to work to change driving behaviors. Advances in new technology, such as Electronic Stability Control, will also play an important role in reducing traffic fatalities in the future.

NHTSA has a multi-pronged approach designed to address behavioral safety factors. We use a comprehensive, data-driven process to identify and break down the problem into its basic elements, then develop and test countermeasure strategies and partner with the States and many traffic safety organizations to implement safety programs.

One of the areas where new advances in technology linked to behavioral programs shows strong promise is in reducing impaired driving crashes. Impaired driving remains one of the leading causes of traffic crashes and fatalities in the U.S.

In 2006, alcohol-impaired driving fatalities accounted for more than 13,400 deaths or 32 percent of all traffic fatalities. Impaired drivers also take a terrible toll on our most precious resource – our children. In 2006, 598 children under the age of 18 were killed in crashes involving an alcohol-impaired driver. Of these, 353 children were killed in a vehicle driven by an alcohol-impaired driver. Another 170 children were occupants of another vehicle involved in a crash with vehicle driven by alcohol-impaired driver and 75 were pedestrians or other non-occupants struck by an alcohol-impaired driver.

NHTSA's approach to reducing these preventable fatalities includes:

- High visibility enforcement campaigns targeting impaired driving, combining the efforts of State and local law enforcement partners with national promotional efforts to increase enforcement and create a general deterrence to drinking and driving.
- Support for the criminal justice system to prosecute and adjudicate impaired driving cases. In particular, we are supporting increased training and education for prosecutors and judges, State Traffic Safety Resource Prosecutors to provide technical assistance to prosecutors handling driving while impaired (DWI) cases, and expanded use of DWI courts. These courts have been shown to reduce recidivism by combining close supervision and mandatory alcohol treatment for DWI offenders and alcohol misuse problems.
- Expanding the use of ignition interlocks and pursuing other advanced alcohol detention technology solutions. Alcohol ignition interlocks have been available for some time, but their use has been relatively limited. There is a growing awareness that they can play an important role in reducing recidivism and States are starting to require their use for first offenders. Drivers with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level of .08 or higher involved in fatal crashes were eight times more likely to have a prior conviction for DWI than were drivers with no alcohol in 2006. Studies have shown that convicted DWI offenders with interlocks are more than 60 percent less likely to recidivate than comparable drivers without interlocks.

NHTSA is also working with the automobile industry to fund vehicle-based impairment detection technology research. Vehicle sensors that determine how much alcohol is in a driver's system, and could be offered on a voluntary, market-driven basis, offer the potential for significant future reductions. While much of this technology is still in the developmental stage, NHTSA plays an important leadership role in working with national partners and the private sector to ensure that this research continues full speed ahead.

There are also other behavioral-related technology systems that can improve vehicle safety. Seat belt reminder systems can be helpful in addressing seat belt use. This technology has improved greatly from its earliest versions back in the 1970s. Lack of seat belt use continues to be a major factor in motor vehicle fatalities. Research has shown that belt use is the most effective traffic safety countermeasure available to prevent fatalities and injuries. Seat belts saved an estimated 75,000 lives between 2002 – 2006.

High visibility enforcement campaigns – like our “Click It or Ticket It” campaign – together with strong primary seat belt laws have proven to be the most effective way to get more people to buckle up. However, progress has been hindered by the fact that only 26 States have primary enforcement laws. One State has no adult seat belt law and the other 23 have less effective secondary laws that only allow officers to issue a seat belt citation to a motorist after they stop the driver for another violation.

The effectiveness of primary belt laws shows up clearly when comparing States. The national seat belt use rate in 2007 was 82 percent. But in States with primary seat belt laws, the belt use rate was 87 percent. Indeed, in some States with primary belt laws, such as Hawaii, Oregon and Washington, seat belt use rates are now higher than 95 percent. States without primary belt laws have an average use rate of 73 percent – and the gap between States with and without primary laws is growing every year.

Higher belt use rates translate directly into saved lives. States with primary belt laws have a 9 percent lower passenger vehicle occupant fatality rate – 0.97 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT) compared to 1.06 – than the other States.

In addition to promoting high visibility enforcement and encouraging States to enact primary belt laws, NHTSA's occupant protection program focuses on high-risk groups, such as rural residents, pickup truck drivers and teens.

We also continue to provide leadership on safety for children. The country has made great strides in increasing occupant protection among young children. Restraint use for children is at an all-time high – more than 98 percent for those less than 1 year old and 96 percent for 1 to 3 year-olds. Much of this success is due to the network of more than 30,000 dedicated child passenger safety technicians across the country that NHTSA has helped develop and nurture over the past 10 years, along with the American Automobile Association and, more recently, Safe Kids WorldWide. These safety advocates work with families to educate parents on the correct use of safety seats. Technology such as the Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children (LATCH) system has also helped to increase the percentage of safety seats installed correctly and we are working to make LATCH even more effective.

Recognizing the importance of LATCH, on January 30, 2008, Secretary Peters and Administrator Nason announced a comprehensive upgrade to NHTSA's Ease of Use child seat rating program. This important consumer information program provides parents with comparative information that they can use when selecting child restraints. The new program includes, for the first time, the use of stars to convey rating information to consumers as well as expanded criteria to better evaluate child restraint labels, LATCH, and child restraint harness designs. We believe that these enhancements will lead to child restraints that are easier to use and continue providing manufacturers with an incentive to distinguish their products based on its ease of use.

However, there is still more work to be done to reach older children. For the 4 – 7 year-old group, restraint use drops to 85 percent. But as more States pass booster seat laws, we anticipate that this number will rise.

One of the most challenging areas we face today is motorcycle safety. The number of fatalities continues to rise. In 2006, 4,810 motorcyclists were killed – an increase of 5 percent over the 2005 number and a 127 percent increase since 1997. NHTSA supports comprehensive efforts to reduce motorcycle-related crashes and injuries, including the use of motorcycle helmets.

In February 2008, legislation was submitted to Congress to allow States to use Section 2010 funding to promote the use of motorcycle helmets. Currently, States are limited to using the funds for motorcycle safety training and motorist awareness programs only. Secretary Peters has proposed legislation that would allow States the flexibility to spend these funds on education concerning the importance of helmet use.

In November 2007, Secretary Peters announced a new Departmental Action Plan to Reduce Motorcycle Fatalities. The plan includes a comprehensive range of initiatives including rider education, tougher standards for helmet certification labeling, law enforcement training, and road designs that consider motorcycle handling dynamics.

The growing number of older drivers also requires attention. The United States is facing a surge in the population of those over age 65. In 2006, there were 30.1 million older licensed drivers – an 18 percent increase from 1996. NHTSA's policy is to promote safe mobility for older road users (age 65 and older), help seniors to drive as long as they can do so safely, and encourage the development of transportation alternatives for those who can no longer drive.

NHTSA developed an Older Driver strategic plan to better target agency programs and resources to address this at-risk and growing population. Key areas of focus include: Screening and Assessment; Licensing; Counseling by Medical Providers; Public Information and Program Promotion; and Other Activities.

Most older drivers are aware of their declining functional abilities and self-regulate by curtailing their driving – they do not drive in poor weather or at night and avoid rush hour. However, some older drivers are either unable or unwilling to recognize their limitations. Better screening and skill assessment devices are needed for these drivers. Improved vehicle and road engineering is also needed to increase crash survivability for older drivers, occupants, and pedestrians.

At the other end of the driving spectrum, NHTSA also has a strategic approach to addressing teen drivers – who are overrepresented in vehicle crashes. In 2006, young drivers, between 15 and 20 years old, accounted for 6.4 percent (13.0 million) of the total number of drivers, but accounted for nearly 13 percent (7,463) of the drivers involved in fatal crashes.

In fact, more teens are killed in motor vehicle crashes than by homicide and suicide combined. To address this challenge, NHTSA has developed a program strategy with several priority areas:

- Encouraging States to enact effective graduated driver licensing laws (GDL). GDL controls for immaturity and inexperience by gradually exposing young novice drivers to the most risky driving situations. While 46 States and the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have some kind of GDL law, many States need to enhance their GDL provisions to maximize this benefit.
- Focusing on increasing the use of seat belts by teens, who have one of the lowest use rates. In 2006, 64 percent of 15-20 year-old passenger vehicle occupants killed in crashes were not restrained. NHTSA encourages States to put a special emphasis on teen drivers

during seat belt enforcement campaigns, and has developed communication and outreach programs to complement law enforcement activities.

- Limiting youth access to alcohol. Studies have shown that access to alcohol contributes to higher teen crash rates. Strategies to address youth access to alcohol include highly visible enforcement of laws against purchasing or otherwise providing alcohol for youth; and actions directed at youth, including “use and lose” laws that confiscate the driver’s licenses of underage drinkers, law enforcement “party patrols,” peer education, and penalties for using false identification.
- Encouraging parents to take a greater role in supervising their teen drivers. In fact, parents can now monitor their teenage driving children through the use of technology that utilizes global positioning devices.

Vehicle-based technological advances will continue to play a major role in reducing crashes and fatalities. Advances in computers and electronics have opened possibilities that were unimaginable 25 years ago. Examples of innovative current and emerging safety technologies today include:

- Lane departure warning systems that use cameras to help keep the driver in the appropriate lane.
- Forward collision warning systems that use radar to sense traffic ahead.
- Automated crash notification systems that use GPS and wireless technology to instantly alert authorities to the location of a serious crash.
- Electronic stability control technology (ESC) that can help prevent skids and rollovers. ESC will be required on all passenger vehicles starting in 2011. This device alone has the potential to save thousands of lives every year. These systems are second only to seat belts in terms of the potential for saving lives and reducing injuries.
- Tire pressure warning systems that tell a driver when the tires are below the minimum acceptable level of tire pressure are now required on all passenger vehicles starting with the 2008 models.

To help motivate automobile manufacturers to install voluntary safety technology in new vehicles, Secretary Peters announced just last week plans to expand the range of safety technology evaluated in the New Car Assessment Program (NCAP).

But even the best technology cannot always prevent crashes. When crashes do occur, having an effective and coordinated emergency medical services system could literally mean the difference between life and death. NHTSA is focusing on strengthening trauma care and emergency medical services (EMS) by providing national leadership and coordination through the Federal Interagency Committee on EMS and the National EMS Advisory Council. NHTSA supports

comprehensive, data-driven and research-based EMS systems to improve the emergency care provided to patients from motor vehicle crashes and other medical emergencies.

Through these behavioral and technology efforts, NHTSA seeks to reduce the toll of motor vehicle crashes in this country. Many of these crashes and fatalities are preventable, and through greater implementation of proven safety countermeasures, we believe that thousands of additional lives could be saved every year.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your consideration and this subcommittee's ongoing efforts to improve highway safety. I would be pleased to answer any questions.