

**Railroad and Hazardous Materials Transportation Programs
Reforms and Improvements to Reduce Regulatory Burdens
Hearing of the House Subcommittee on
Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials**

**Statement of Helen M. Sramek
President
Operation Lifesaver, Inc.**

**April 7, 2011
Washington, D.C.**

Mr. Chairman:

Thank you and members of the subcommittee for including Operation Lifesaver in today's hearing to discuss our rail safety education program. My name is Helen Sramek, and I have been President of this organization for the past four years.

Mr. Chairman, Operation Lifesaver exists because of a startling fact – about every three hours in the United States, a person or a vehicle is hit by a train. We are the only nationwide public safety organization whose sole mission is to save lives and reduce injuries at highway-rail crossings and on or around railroad property. We do this by developing training and safety education materials and certifying volunteer presenters who deliver free presentations on how to make safe decisions near train tracks in communities around the country.

As I will explain later in my statement, this program began and remains grassroots-driven. There are independent Operation Lifesaver programs in all 50 states. They are managed by OL coordinators in each state --- dedicated men and women who are trained to work with volunteers, partner with state and local officials, and represent OL with the news media. These state programs are members of the national Operation Lifesaver organization, which oversees development of the public awareness and education materials that are used by state programs.

Legislative Recommendation and Justification

- We urge Congress to retain the set-aside from the highway trust fund for Operation Lifesaver that is included in SAFETEA-LU, and earlier versions of the surface transportation legislation. These funds (less than \$500,000 annually in recent years) are provided to Operation Lifesaver to carry out public information and education programs in all 50 states to help prevent and reduce motor vehicle collisions, fatalities and injuries at highway-rail crossings and on or around railroad tracks.

Justification:

- A modest investment of federal tax dollars to Operation Lifesaver has helped contribute to continued improvement in crossing safety. In the past 10 years alone, we have seen a drop of 38% in crossing collisions, 38% in crossing-related fatalities, and 30% in injuries. These gains have resulted from improvements at crossings, elimination of highway-rail grade crossings, targeted enforcement efforts, and public safety education programs, including the sustained efforts of Operation Lifesaver. By embracing the model of the 3 E's of traffic safety - education, enforcement, and engineering - Operation Lifesaver's singular focus on public education at highway-rail crossings has contributed to these safety gains.
- Operation Lifesaver develops community and state-wide projects that match a modest investment of federal dollars with private contributions or in-kind support for our safety activities. Safety is a shared responsibility of the public and private sectors.
- A collision between a train and vehicle is likely to be devastating, resulting in loss of life or catastrophic injury. These collisions can tie up crossings for hours, wreaking havoc in communities and impeding the flow of commerce. Such collisions almost always draw substantial media coverage.
- There's more than intrinsic value in lives saved or fewer injuries resulting from crashes. Society loses; communities suffer; the flow of commerce is disrupted; insurance rates go up.
- Freight traffic is increasing as the economy improves; more passenger, commuter and light rail systems are coming on-line, exposing the public to more risk if they are unaware of the dangers that accompany increased train traffic.
- Today's trains are quieter than most people think; are traveling at higher speeds than many believe; and can come from either direction. Absent education, the public is at a serious disadvantage.
- An impatient, risk-taking public that is increasingly distracted with all kinds of mobile devices is more vulnerable around trains.
- This program, nationally and within the states, generates considerable goodwill as it is the consistent voice with one specific, narrowly defined mission: saving lives and reducing injuries at highway-rail crossings and on or around railroad property.
- Absent the federal investment, crossing safety measures may continue, but lack focus, consistency in message delivery, and loss of in-kind support offered by volunteers, state and local governments, and safety related non-profit organizations.

History of Operation Lifesaver

Operation Lifesaver is a national public non-profit education and awareness program dedicated to eliminating the tragic - and largely preventable - fatalities and injuries at America's highway-rail grade crossings and along railroad rights-of-way. Because of its success and visibility, OL programs have sprung up in other countries, including Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Estonia, Finland, and the United Kingdom. It is likely that Israel will create a similar type education program within the next year. Today Operation Lifesaver is an international organization centered on the importance of public rail safety education to save lives.

Next year marks the 40th anniversary of the organization. It all began in Idaho in 1972 when there were over 12,000 collisions annually between vehicles and trains, tragically resulting in 1200 crossing fatalities. The state of Idaho started Operation Lifesaver as a six-week public awareness educational campaign to promote highway-rail grade crossing safety. Idaho's crossing-related fatalities fell that year by 43%. Inspired by Idaho's success, the program quickly expanded to other states – a true grassroots movement, driven largely by volunteers who share a passion for preventing deaths and injuries around railroad tracks.

In 1986 a national, non-profit education organization was created and is now based in Alexandria, Virginia. Along with private funding, OLI receives federal grants from the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Railroad Administration and the Federal Transit Administration. Thanks to the efforts of this subcommittee, Operation Lifesaver's programs are included in the Rail Safety Improvement Act. In 2002, Operation Lifesaver began working with transit agencies to assist with their public education outreach efforts. Based on 2010 preliminary statistics collected by the Federal Railroad Administration, crossing collisions have fallen to just over 2000, resulting in 260 deaths and 810 injuries. While we saw a small uptick in crossing collisions in 2010, the highway-rail incident rate has dropped from 4.55 to 2.85 per million train-miles in the past decade.

The key to Operation Lifesaver's Success

Our passionate volunteers are one of OL's greatest strengths. We have 1800 active presenters working on behalf of Operation Lifesaver today. If you have a moment to check our website, www.oli.org you will find the story of one: Robin Potter of Fresno, California. She lost her 15-year-old son, Shawn, a few years ago because he was playing chicken with a train. "Shawn lost his life because he thought he could outrun a train," says Robin, who is now a certified Operation Lifesaver presenter. She volunteers with Operation Lifesaver so that other mothers won't have to experience a similar tragedy. You can also see the story of the often-forgotten victim: the engineer or conductor on the train who witnesses a tragedy unfold before their eyes.

These are some of the faces of Operation Lifesaver – the people who dedicate their time and energies toward educating the public to the dangers that are present on or around railroad tracks. Many of these volunteers agree to become certified presenters, trained to go into our schools and other community venues offering free safety presentations. Along with our state coordinators, they reach out to law enforcement officers, school bus operators, driver's education programs, commercial drivers, emergency responders, and others. They attend presenter classes to master the material and techniques for reaching different audiences. They must stay current on the material in order to retain their certification status. Other volunteers manage booths and exhibits at community health and safety fairs. They are linked by bonds of a safety community dedicated to one mission: saving lives.

OLI's national support center assists our state-based programs by providing the latest in education information and techniques to keep our message current and relevant to today's audiences. OLI serves as the national voice on highway-rail safety issues, implements national public awareness campaigns, develops and coordinates distribution of public service announcements, videos and literature. OLI challenges the advertising community and photographers who naively or foolishly choose to use images of dangerous activity around railroad property to sell their products.

Challenges

- In difficult economic periods, small programs like Operation Lifesaver cannot help but be concerned when budget cuts dominate the public discussion. As stated earlier, working with our safety partners, Operation Lifesaver's efforts have contributed to a substantial reduction in

vehicle-train collisions, fatalities and injuries. Other safety issues may come to the forefront, and absent sufficient dollars, policymakers could reorder priorities. The focus on rail safety education must prevail, particularly as more freight and passenger rail is expected.

- We continue to notice a disturbing increase in the number of collisions, fatalities and injuries occurring when people choose to walk or play on or near railroad tracks. Needless to say, Operation Lifesaver continues to expand its awareness and education programs in the area of pedestrian safety. Our work carries more urgency because many people do not realize or ignore the fact that walking on tracks is trespassing on private property, and is illegal and a potentially deadly activity.
- Operation Lifesaver also faces the challenge of developing and implementing our programs to reach audiences for whom English is a second language. Many of our materials are produced in Spanish, with other languages like Chinese, Hmong, Vietnamese and Somali also being used in some communities around the country.
- We are now aggressively expanding our capabilities to utilize new technologies to reach new and younger audiences. Last November we unveiled our new website designed to meet the needs of existing users while making it more appealing to younger, tech-savvy users. We use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to reach new audiences every day.
- In June, we will unveil an e-Learning program for professional drivers that will take OL-training to the next level, with the potential to reach millions of truck drivers through the Internet. We chose professional drivers for the first e-Learning program because tractor-trailers and other large trucks represent more than 25% of all vehicle-train incidents annually. The new e-Learning program will provide relevant, engaging and behavior-changing learning experiences that the professional driver can apply on the job. This Internet-based tool creates a simulated environment that exposes the driver to worst case scenarios requiring quick thinking and critical decision-making that could make the difference between life or death.

Conclusion

I conclude by thanking members of the subcommittee for taking their time to review a very small, but effective program that has enjoyed congressional support for almost 30 years. Your predecessors made a wise decision by investing in a safety organization that succeeds in part because of our “boots on the ground” capabilities with state program leaders and volunteers. By allowing creation of a National Office, Congress understood the need to have an overarching, consistent safety mission that can be shared with the public in many different ways.

We understand that Congress must scrutinize every single dollar that is appropriated in the interests of reducing the nation’s deficit. As you approach that difficult task, the words of the chairwoman of the National Transportation Safety Board can serve as a guide. Not long ago, she was quoted as follows: “Safety is not discretionary. Safety deferred is safety denied.... We can pay now, or we can pay later.”

Thank you.

COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
Truth in Testimony Disclosure

Pursuant to clause 2(g)(5) of House Rule XI, in the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include: (1) a curriculum vitae; and (2) a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by an entity represented by the witness. Such statements, with appropriate redaction to protect the privacy of the witness, shall be made publicly available in electronic form not later than one day after the witness appears.

(1) Name: *HELEN M. SRAMEK*

(2) Other than yourself, name of entity you are representing:

OPERATION LIFESAVER, INC.

(3) Are you testifying on behalf of an entity other than a Government (federal, state, local) entity?

YES

If yes, please provide the information requested below and attach your curriculum vitae.

NO

(4) Please list the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by you or by the entity you are representing:

FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION - \$ 482,000
FEDERAL RAILROAD ADMINISTRATION - \$1,015,000
FEDERAL TRANSIT ADMINISTRATION - \$200,000

(Safety Offices)

Helen M. Sramek
Signature

4/5/11
Date

Biography
Helen M. Sramek
President, Operation Lifesaver, Inc.
1420 King Street, #401
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

2007-to Present

President, Operation Lifesaver, Inc.

Manages the operations, staffing and funding for the national office of Operation Lifesaver, Inc. Provides staff and organizational oversight to ensure that programs and services are carried out effectively and managed with appropriate transparency and accountability to promote OL's public standing and enable the organization to carry out its mission to save lives and reduce injuries at highway-rail crossings and on or around railroad property.

Represents the organization nationally with the media, testimony before congressional committees, and in presentations to national or regional conferences.

1998-2006

Director, Federal Relations, AAA.

Led AAA's Federal advocacy team in their efforts to lobby congress and federal agencies on the association's public policy initiatives. Helped develop and advocate AAA's traffic safety priorities in TEA-21 and SAFETEA-LU. Organized AAA's engagement in national efforts linked to the 50th anniversary of the Interstate Highway System, with the goal of increasing public sentiment for infrastructure investment. Worked with AAA's Publishing Alliance to promote the association's policy positions.

1993-1998

Independent Consultant.

Worked on international projects that required congressional and/or media relations.

1990-1993

Executive Assistant to the Administrator for the Agency for International Development.

Senior staff person working on projects as assigned by the Administrator of this independent agency. Supported initiatives with the private voluntary community that delivers foreign assistance programs, international training activities, and what was then the developing program of assistance to Eastern and Central Europe.

1970-1990

Congressional staff in several congressional offices.

Chief of Staff to a Nebraska Congressman for 11 years; held legislative positions in both House and Senate offices over this period.

Education: BA from Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln, Nebraska

Graduate work, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

Completed various Leadership Training Programs through Eckard College, Florida.

Born and raised in Nebraska; maintain family and professional contacts in the state.