

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JAMES L. OBERSTAR
HEARING ON IMPROVING ROADWAY SAFETY: ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE
NHTSA'S HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY PROGRAMS
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT
JULY 16, 2008**

I want to thank Chairman DeFazio and Ranking Member Duncan for holding this hearing on such a critical issue as the safety of our nation's roadways. Addressing this issue will be a top priority for this Committee in the authorization of the next surface transportation bill.

Every year tens of thousands of Americans are killed on our nation's roadways. However, the costs of these numbers cannot be measured simply in dollars and cents or statistics. These numbers represent brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, and friends and family members.

Today, this Committee will hear from a number of witnesses about the effectiveness of NHTSA's various safety programs in addressing this problem. To be able to truly assess this progress, we must be realistic about the current state of safety on American roads.

In 2006, 42,642 people lost their lives in motor vehicle crashes. That is the equivalent of 82 fully loaded 747s crashing. If that many people were dying annually in plane crashes, the public would be terrified and outraged. Yet, for too long we have accepted traffic fatalities as a regular occurrence.

I strongly favor the vision of making roadway safety a priority, and preventing the tragic loss of life and injuries that occur every day on our roads.

In SAFETEA-LU, we took a number of steps to address issues related to safety in our federal transportation policy. Looking forward to the next surface transportation program authorization, we must do even more on the issue.

Our nation is not alone in facing the terrible consequences of roadway fatalities. This issue impacts every nation; rich or poor. Our partners across the Atlantic have begun to take serious steps towards addressing the problems that contribute to roadway safety, and we here in the United States must tackle this issue with the same level of commitment as the Europeans have shown.

In 2001, the European Commission issued its Transport Policy White Paper. Improving road safety is a major aspect of the issues addressed in the White Paper. The report highlights the conflicting needs for greater mobility and greater awareness regarding road safety in the European Union. The Commission set a goal of cutting the number of roadway fatalities in half by 2010. At the time the White Paper was published in 2001, there were 50,394 deaths on European Union roads annually. In 2004 that number was

reduced to **43,000**, a decrease from **112 fatalities per million** inhabitants in 2001 to **95 fatalities per million in 2004**.

A look at data for individual member states demonstrates the impact of placing a priority on safety.

France has seen a decrease in fatal road accidents of 12 percent from 2005 to 2006 and a decrease of 5 percent in injuries from accidents. Since 2001—when the EU set its goal of halving road fatalities—until 2004, France has seen a decline in fatalities of over 30 percent.

Portugal saw a 22 percent drop in road accident deaths and a 6 percent decline in injuries from 2005 to 2006. One factor behind this was a newly passed law making it a crime to use a cell phone while driving.

Over this same period, the U.S. fatality rate has remained relatively flat. In 1990, our nation's roadways saw 44,599 roadway fatalities. In 2000, that number was 41,945. However, by 2006 we saw that number reach almost 45,000.

Clearly we as a nation need to make a new commitment to saving lives and sparing countless individuals and their loved ones from the pain that comes in the wake of traffic crashes.

Addressing this troubling number of fatalities on our roadways will require a comprehensive approach to highway safety. We as policy makers must work to ensure that all aspects of roadway safety—vehicle safety, human factors, and roadway environment—remain a priority as we rewrite our nation's surface transportation programs. The Subcommittee on Highways and Transit will continue to conduct a series of hearings throughout this year and into 2009 to examine policy choices and develop legislation to build the future multimodal surface transportation system. Evaluating the safety needs of the system, the programmatic structure necessary to meet those needs, and institutionalizing the mechanics for increased accountability will be fundamental to that process.

I look forward to hearing from the witnesses and members of this Subcommittee on this critical issue.