

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE PETER A. DEFazio
CHAIRMAN, SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
HEARING ON
IMPROVING ROADWAY SAFETY: ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NHTSA'S
HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY PROGRAMS

July 16, 2008

Perhaps more than anything else, safety should be our number one priority when it comes to our nation's surface transportation system. Drivers and passengers have a right to safe road conditions no matter where they are traveling on our roadways. We are holding this hearing this morning to evaluate the effectiveness of NHTSA's highway safety programs and to hear from NHTSA and others who are working to improve highway safety.

While we have made progress in reducing the number of fatalities and injuries in motor vehicle crashes, annual death and injury totals are still unacceptably high. In 2006, 42,642 people lost their lives and more than 2.6 million people were injured in motor vehicle crashes. Motor vehicle crashes are now the leading cause of death and disability for Americans ages two through thirty-four.

The 6.2 million motor vehicle crashes in 2006 cost an estimated \$230.6 billion related to deaths, injuries, property damage, productivity loss, and medical bills. But deaths and injuries can't be measured in dollars and cents. They are measured by the loss and pain of family, friends, and loved ones.

With human error the cause of 93 percent of all motor vehicle crashes, we can and must do more to reduce accidents and educate drivers.

We already know where most of the work needs to be done: the two leading causes of highway fatalities are lack of seat belt use and impaired driving. While NHTSA reports a 2007 seat belt usage rate of 81 percent, in 2006 51 percent of passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes were not wearing seat belts. What a clear correlation – drivers and passengers have a much better chance of surviving a crash if they simply click their seat belts into place. And despite the successful implementation of federal and state initiatives to address and enforce drunk driving laws, data shows that in 2006 17,602 people were killed in alcohol-related crashes – 41 percent of all fatal traffic crashes.

As we prepare to reauthorize our surface transportation programs, highway safety must be a top priority. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on how we can better address these issues.

Thank you.