

Testimony of Ann Carlson, Acting Administrator, NHTSA
United States House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
Oversight of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act: Modal Perspectives
December 13, 2023

Good morning, Chairman Crawford, Ranking Member Norton, and members of the subcommittee. I am Ann Carlson, Acting Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Thank you for inviting me to testify today on NHTSA's efforts, under the leadership of U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, to fulfill the agency's important safety mission.

Every person has been touched by crashes on our nation's roads. Many of us have lost loved ones, friends, or family to a crash, as I have. And virtually everyone knows someone who has been injured. That's why NHTSA's work touches every person in the United States every day. NHTSA is committed to making the nation's roads safer for everyone, preventing crashes, and reducing fatalities, injuries, and the economic cost of crashes on our roads.

Today I'm pleased to share new early estimates of traffic fatalities for January through September of 2023, which project that traffic fatalities declined for the sixth straight quarter. We are projecting that fatalities decreased about 4.5 percent from the same time in 2022.

While we are optimistic that we're finally seeing a reversal of the record-high fatalities seen during the pandemic, this is not a cause for celebration. An estimated 19,515 people died in motor vehicle traffic crashes in the first half of 2023, a devastating loss that Secretary Buttigieg has rightly called a crisis on our roadways.

That's why NHTSA – and the whole U.S. Department of Transportation – is leaning in on the safe system approach and the Department's National Roadway Safety Strategy.

The only acceptable number of fatalities is zero. Getting to zero will require consistent, dedicated focus and work from every level of government, safety advocates, and the private sector.

One way we are working toward zero fatalities is by using the remarkable new resources Congress provided NHTSA through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, or BIL. I thank you for increasing NHTSA's overall budget by more than 50 percent.

BIL also directs us to conduct a number of new research projects and rulemakings. NHTSA continues to work as quickly as possible on these critical projects and rules to save lives and to meet our statutory obligations.

We have issued a proposed rule to require automatic emergency braking, or AEB, and pedestrian AEB in new passenger cars and light trucks. With the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, we have issued a proposed rule to require AEB in heavy vehicles, including tractor trailers. When deployed, these technologies should dramatically reduce rear-end crashes, save more than 500 lives and prevent nearly 33,000 injuries per year.

NHTSA has also proposed significant upgrades to our 5-Star Safety Ratings program, and we completed a BIL directive in February 2022 when we issued our final adaptive driving beam rule.

We are also working closely with the states and especially those communities most significantly affected by traffic crashes. This includes both urban and rural areas. It's worth noting, for example, that while 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas, they accounted for 40 percent of all traffic fatalities in 2021.

Every decision we make at NHTSA puts safety first, and this also informs our approach to emerging vehicle technologies, including automated driving systems, or ADS, and advanced driver assistance systems, or ADAS, too.

Promoting innovation while prioritizing a strong safety culture is at the heart of NHTSA's work in this rapidly evolving sector. Innovation and safety must go hand in hand – a robust safety culture builds public trust in advanced technologies and automated vehicles. We are using all of our authorities and research capabilities to ensure that we advance technologies that make vehicles and roadways safer.

Finally, NHTSA takes its enforcement responsibilities very seriously. So far this year, NHTSA has opened 40 defect investigations, closed 28 investigations, and overseen more than 900 safety recalls of vehicles, car seats, tires, and other equipment, as of Monday. Our Office of Odometer Fraud Investigation has opened 13 criminal investigations this year.

NHTSA is a small agency with a big mission, and safety is at the heart of everything we do. I care very deeply about the safety of every person who uses our roads, no matter if they drive, walk, bike, ride or roll. They all deserve to arrive home to their loved ones safe and sound at the end of every day.

I thank the committee for its support of NHTSA's lifesaving mission, and I look forward to answering your questions and continuing to work with you to save lives on America's roads.

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