

**Remarks prepared for
Ronald Medford, Deputy Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**

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Thank you for your warm welcome. It's great to be back in Texas and have this opportunity to discuss highway safety with you.

I'd like to start by thanking everybody in this room on behalf of our Secretary of Transportation, the Honorable Ray LaHood. He is very sorry he could not be here, but he sends his regards. For myself, Secretary LaHood, and

NHTSA Administrator David Strickland, thank you for your service to our great country. I am honored to be here.

It takes me back to the start of my own career, when I spent four years in the Air Force.

Everyone in this room knows what it means to forsake safety and family to answer the call of duty, so the rest of us don't have to. Some of you have the added responsibility of leading men and women into harm's way as part of your job.

It troubles me to tell you that once you get them home safely, they are coming home to the risk of death and injury on our roadways ... a very high risk of death and injury.

The historical evidence tells the story. For example, we know the highway mortality risk for Vietnam veterans was two times higher in the first 5 years after deployment compared to non-Vietnam veterans.

Gulf War veterans had a 30 to 50 percent greater mortality risk compared to non-Gulf War veterans—and this increased risk was observed in both men and women.

Our numbers through 2006 for Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom show the mortality risk due to crashes was 75 percent greater than the comparable U.S. general population. About 25 percent of the deaths involved motorcycles.

Veterans at risk for these crashes in the first few years after deployment tend to be young, unmarried, and male. They tend to have served at times of ground combat, particularly those in the infantry, on gun crews, or in seamanship occupations.

For the Air Force, in 2008, numbers tell us that traffic crashes, motorcycle crashes, and sports and recreation accidents were the main causes of accidental death and injury. What's more, in the past five years, 70 percent of Air Force fatal Private Motor Vehicle (PMV) mishaps (149 out of 213) were due to some form of reckless behavior – speeding, alcohol, not wearing seat belts or not wearing a motorcycle helmet.

NHTSA is working side by side with the Department of Veterans Affairs to better understand the problem. Our goal is to increase awareness and prevention of motor vehicle crashes. We are helping the VA inform and educate veterans and their families, as well as government, nonprofit, and private sector organizations that reach them.

Traffic safety affects us all, and we are constantly working to find ways to reach everybody with the safety message.

Nationally, in 2006, motor vehicle traffic crashes were the leading cause of death for every age 3 through 34.

I can break it down for you even further. In 2008, the last year we have numbers for, 26,689 vehicle occupants died in crashes. The majority of those, 25, 351, were in passenger vehicles. More than 5,000 died riding a motorcycle – 5,290 to be exact. And 5,282 pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-occupants died in vehicle related crashes. The total number of traffic-related fatalities in 2008 was 37,261.

That number is the equivalent to 90 fully loaded jumbo jets. Can you imagine the reaction if we had 90 747s crash in one year? It's a huge number and we take it very seriously.

And we see great hope for safety in the future through the proper use of technology. NHTSA is doing some fairly exciting work on vehicle-based technologies such as Forward

Collision Warning Systems and Lane Departure Warning Systems that provide drivers a little extra help when they need it most. Other technologies such as those capable of detecting vulnerable road-users such as pedestrians and cyclists also show great promise.

For example, we are looking at the future safety benefits of vehicle-to-vehicle communications, or V2V. NHTSA has entered into a cooperative agreement with an industry partnership that will develop and evaluate the effectiveness of safety systems that use vehicle-to-vehicle communications. We're in the second year of a 4-year effort that is part of the Department's Intellidrive Program.

This project will ensure that vehicle communications are interoperable across all vehicles regardless of make or model. The effort will also help us determine the minimum performance levels and safety benefits enabled by V2V. We believe this technology has the potential to save thousands of lives each year while at the same time offering the opportunity to reduce congestion and provide other services to vehicles drivers.

Drivers and other road users must take an active role in safety—their own and that of those sharing the road.

Technologies may be able to detect the presence of vulnerable road users, but both they and the vehicle drivers need to be on the lookout for each other.

Take for example, the issue of Distracted Driving.

The jury is definitely in on cell phone use and driving—be it for texting or talking or whatever else. Distracted Driving is dangerous – almost 6000 lives lost in 2008 alone due to all types of distractions – and we are determined to put an end to it.

In fact, I can tell you, the Secretary of Transportation is on a rampage about Distracted Driving. Last fall, the Department held a summit on Distracted Driving. It was the first in the Nation to call Federal attention to this dangerous problem, and propose a range of realistic solutions.

We recently unveiled sample legislation that States can use as a starting point to craft laws prohibiting texting while driving. The sample bill is patterned after President Obama's October 1, 2009, Executive Order prohibiting federal employees from texting while operating government-owned vehicles and equipment. Hopefully, this will help all the State legislatures currently considering such laws to move forward.

So far, 28 States plus D.C. have texting laws covering all drivers. That's a good start, but we've got to do better. I know lawmakers around the country are studying this seriously. And we're seeking 50 million dollars in next year's budget for an incentive grant program to encourage more states to pass these laws.

And in Syracuse, New York and Hartford, Connecticut, we just kicked off a two-year federally funded pilot program to test the effectiveness of highly publicized law enforcement efforts to change drivers' behaviors and get them to put down their cell phones.

On the outreach side, we're sponsoring a website, distraction.gov, which acts as a national clearinghouse for information on distracted driving. It also makes our position on Distracted Driving clear, and it details our commitment to work across the spectrum with private and public entities as well as advocacy groups to tackle Distracted Driving.

We are all very encouraged by the momentum that is building against Distracted Driving. Our intent is to develop an evaluative framework for in-car technologies. Rather than react to every technology as it pops up by a car manufacturer and becomes a distraction, we are taking the lead rather than a backseat while new telematics and *infotainment* systems are introduced into cars.

These have too great a potential to create more and more distraction for the driver. As part of our NHTSA Distraction Plan we will be taking a hard look at federal guidelines or requirements for these systems. We are challenging the auto industry and the cell phone industry to work collaboratively with us to keep the driver focused on their required task: driving.

But there are things that everyone one of us can do starting today. At NHTSA we believe the first line of defense is the family. Each of us must take responsibility for ourselves and our loved ones, including buckling up, and making good decisions about driving and risk taking.

If you are a parent, set the example. Your kids are watching you. Don't drive distracted. Don't drink and drive. Buckle up each and every time. When you are ready to turn over the keys to your young driver, make sure you have set standards for safe driving. And make those standards stick.

You have all put yourselves in harm's way to protect our way of life. NHTSA is determined to look at every strategy – from education to enforcement – to identify those that work best with veterans – and we won't stop until we can bring the numbers under control. Thank you.