

**Remarks prepared for
David Strickland
Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**

**Lifesaver's Conference
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Good morning. Thank you, Lifesavers 28 for your warm welcome and the invitation to be with you this morning. Thank you, Flaura and thank you to the Lifesavers Planning Committee and the sponsors for your continuing efforts to make this conference so successful every year.

We have a lot to talk about.

I was sworn in as the NHTSA Administrator on January 4, but in my previous life as part of the staff at the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, I spent a lot of time on highway safety issues, and on consumer safety issues.

Knowing the breadth and scope of the safety mission before us, I rolled up my sleeves even before I arrived at NHTSA headquarters to do my best to hit the ground running. I'm ready to help the Agency deliver on its mission, and, I am ready to position this Agency so that it can work to address all of our challenges, on both the vehicle and behavioral fronts.

Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1809:

“The care of human life and happiness . . . is the first and only legitimate object of good government.”

NHTSA’s safety mission epitomizes the “care of human life.”

President Jefferson’s quote captures my belief in the consumer protection mission of this Agency – it is central to my belief about NHTSA.

Our mission remains the same: Save lives and prevent injuries due to road traffic crashes. And I promise you. Our approach will be aggressive. We will tackle problems as we see them, head on. We will be accountable to the President, to the Secretary of Transportation, and to the American Public, whom we serve.

Last month, the Secretary released numbers that show a continuing dramatic reduction in the overall number of highway deaths. Our analysis projects that traffic fatalities have declined for the 15th consecutive quarter, and will be 33,963 in 2009, the lowest annual level since 1954. In terms of lives lost per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, the number of deaths dropped to 1.16, again the lowest level on record.

And I want to stop right here and say, thank you, for your part in this good news.

Are we winning the battle? Not yet. The loss of more than 33,000 people in traffic-related crashes in a single year represents a serious public health problem to our Nation. We will not rest until that number is zero.

How do we get to zero? Highway safety is a complex issue, and it demands collaboration. It can only work if each of us at the Federal, State and local level steps up to do our part— independent, yet integrated—saving lives on our roads and highways.

The President is committed to doing his part. He has proposed a transformative U.S. transportation policy that improves public health and safety, fosters livable communities, promotes infrastructure repair, and long-term economic competitiveness, while achieving environmental sustainability.

We took a first step last week when we unveiled an historic rule for better fuel economy and lower emissions in conjunction with the Environmental Protection Agency. This rule will save nearly 2 billion gallons of oil, and cut greenhouse gas tail-pipe emissions by nearly a billion metric tons—the equivalent to taking nearly 50 million cars off American roads.

The Nation's first Livable Communities Initiative, developed by the Department of Transportation in coordination with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency, will measurably enhance quality of life for families, workers, and communities across America. This translates into Federal support for more transportation choices, more public transportation, and more commercial and residential development around transportation hubs.

That includes roads, rails, and transit, and safer passage for pedestrians and bicyclists. On March 15, the Secretary announced a new policy on bicycle and pedestrian safety that clearly states that every transportation Agency, including DOT, has the responsibility to improve conditions and opportunities for walking and bicycling and to integrate these modes into their transportation systems.

The Department is actively promoting increased travel by foot and bicycle to reduce congestion, pollution and reliance on oil, and improve traveler's health.

Of course, increased walking and biking could mean increased exposure and increased crash risk. That's where we all can take an active role in keeping pedestrians and bicyclists safe. We need to educate our youth and seniors on safe walking skills and behaviors. We must educate bicyclists on the importance of wearing a helmet and obeying the rules of the road, and, we must increase motorist attention to pedestrians and bicyclists.

We must hold all road users – motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists – accountable for their own and each other's safety through active enforcement. As with seat belt and impaired driving programs, I believe enforcement plays a vital role in pedestrian safety.

And lastly, we must improve walking and biking facilities to provide our citizens safe places to walk and bike.

We have awarded major pedestrian safety demonstration projects to New Mexico, North Carolina, Florida, and Chicago. They will implement comprehensive pedestrian safety programs over the next three years that include infrastructure improvements and also contain strong educational and enforcement components. We hope that these projects will serve as a model for other States, cities and communities.

Because as you well know, creating a culture of traffic safety takes time, it takes planning, and lots of effort. You know that first hand.

And I want to make it clear, that my goal is to make sure that we keep making gains in lives saved by using all the tools at our disposal. We will not relent on any aspect of our mission. And we will continue to support all of our safety partners in the work that we do.

For example, I cannot overemphasize the importance of your work in child passenger safety. It is important now, and it has repercussions in the future of so many lives. We will continue to hammer on and raise awareness of this issue through our national efforts. And we will continue to support Child Passenger Safety with Ease of Use ratings, LATCH information dissemination, national campaigns on Seat Check Saturday, Child Passenger Safety Week, and of course, safety recalls.

With your help, we will keep safety at the top of every family's priority list.

Our own priority list remains true to our mission. Drunk

Driving, for example, remains a top priority for NHTSA.

NHTSA will not back away from our commitment to eliminate this crime from our roadways.

We will continue to support our law enforcement partners with national campaigns, training, and other resources. We will continue to encourage States to expand and improve their ignition interlock programs as part of a comprehensive approach to the problem. I'll repeat myself: we are committed to eliminating Drunk Driving from our roadways.

Our commitment to 100 percent seat belt use across the Nation is just as strong. We will continue to work closely with law enforcement and State and local safety advocates to promote seat belt use. The simple seat belt has saved more lives than any other technological invention ever implemented in vehicles. And even though seat belt use is at an all-time high across the country, we still have work to do. I feel we have major gains to make in that area and I assure you we are not backing away from our commitment to this important safety issue.

Decades of experience with seat belts and Drunk Driving has taught us it takes a consistent combination of leadership from elected officials at all levels of government, as well as public education, effective enforcement, a committed judiciary, and grassroots advocacy, to make a dent in a problem. This experience shows that drivers can and do change their behavior over time.

Take for example, the issue of Distracted Driving.

When Alexander Graham Bell uttered the first words ever spoken over a telephone: “Mr. Watson, come here. I want you.” He had no idea the world he would help create. Look at us now—we’re all packing Blackberries and we absolutely refuse to be disconnected—even for one minute.

Has it made us more productive at work? Undoubtedly. Has it made us better communicators? I think the jury is out on that one still. 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 – 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. Hopefully, this will help all the State legislatures currently considering such laws to move forward.

So far, 21 States plus D.C. have texting laws covering all drivers – Iowa became the 21th State earlier this year. That’s a good start, but we’ve got to do better. I know lawmakers around the country are studying this seriously.

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 driver behavior 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.

I am very encouraged by the momentum that is building against Distracted Driving. And we are going to tackle distraction from the vehicle side as well.

My intent is for NHTSA to develop an evaluative framework for in-car technologies. We are in the second decade of the 21st century and I guarantee there will be a constant stream of new, whiz-bang gadgetry for in-vehicle use. Rather than react to every technology as it pops up and becomes a distraction, NHTSA needs a framework that clearly defines the danger zone for the driver — allowing NHTSA to keep pace with the industry, rather than playing catch-up.

We have many safety challenges in front of us. But I am optimistic that we are on the right track. We all share in this opportunity to make our Nation's roadways the safest in the world. Secretary LaHood has vowed to keep safety as the top priority for the Department, and he has vowed to do so in a spirit of openness and collaboration. I am making that same commitment for NHTSA. Thank you.