

Remarks prepared for
Ronald Medford, Deputy Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
For the
NOYS
Teen Distracted Driving Summit
Washington, D.C.
October 17, 2011

Good morning. I'm delighted to join you. I want to thank all of you for choosing to be a part of the solution to distracted driving crashes and for helping us spread the word. I especially want to congratulate all the participating teens on your creativity and commitment to spreading the message. You truly make a difference!

I'd like to acknowledge quickly:

- **Sandy Spavone from NOYS who has been working alongside of NHTSA to raise awareness about the issue of teen driving safety**

- **Ann Dellinger of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for her work on the injury impact of texting while driving, and**
- **Member Sumwalt of the National Transportation Safety Board for NTSB efforts to address teen driver safety.**

On behalf of Secretary LaHood, I can tell you that you have his, and the entire Department of Transportation's, support in your efforts to improve the safety of America's teenage drivers behind the wheel.

At the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, we've been working for many years to save lives on our Nation's highways, and teen driver safety has long been a priority.

Why are we so concerned? In the big picture of highway safety, we know that for Americans between 3 and 33, the leading cause of death is motor vehicle crashes. The danger is especially great for teenagers. In 2009, 11 percent of all drivers involved in fatal crashes were teenagers 15 to 20 years old and 14 percent of all drivers involved in police-reported crashes were young drivers.

In that context, let's talk about Distracted Driving. Many of you are in the early days of what will hopefully be a long history of positive driving experiences. When I was your age, getting my first car meant I would finally have a social life! Today, you are part of a tremendously social and connected world that doesn't require a vehicle, only your favorite smart phone. You're connected at all times, and while I wish I had that kind of social experience at your age, I have to tell you that socializing by mobile device and driving just don't mix.

Texting while driving is the “perfect storm of distraction” in that it involves visual, manual and cognitive distractions that together are especially risky. Drivers who send and receive text messages take their eyes off the road for an average of 4.6 out of every 6 seconds – over 75 percent of the time while texting your eyes are off the road. At 55 miles per hour, this is the equivalent of traveling the length of an entire football field without looking at the road.

The numbers tell the story. An estimated 20 percent of the 1.52 million injury crashes in 2009 involved reports of distracted driving. Distractions, such as cell phone use and texting, are enticing and readily accessible and are a factor in many crashes involving teen drivers. One in three teens who text say they have done so while driving.

Based on our data, the under-20 age group had the greatest proportion of distracted drivers – 16 percent of all

drivers younger than 20 involved in fatal crashes were reported to have been distracted while driving. I find this especially heartbreaking because we all know that every one of these tragic losses is unnecessary – crashes caused by distracted drivers are preventable.

We believe the true role of distraction in crashes may be even larger because distractions before a crash often leave no evidence for law enforcement officers or crash investigators to observe, and drivers are understandably reluctant to admit to being distracted – especially following a crash. NHTSA is taking steps to obtain more accurate and better data to define the size and nature of crashes related to distraction

As a teenage driver, you lack driving experience that can prevent you from critical misjudgments if you become distracted. Yet you text more than any other age group. Research suggests that when teens start doing something

other than driving when behind the wheel, they are much more likely to glance inside the vehicle for longer periods of time than more experienced drivers. These periods of distraction appear highly related to crashes and near crashes for drivers of all ages, but especially for teen drivers.

NHTSA's decades of experience promoting seat belt use and combating drunk driving has taught us that it takes a combination of leadership at all levels of government, comprehensive strategy, public education, effective enforcement and adjudication, and grassroots advocacy, to improve and sustain safety performance.

Our experience shows that drivers can and do change their behavior over time. By leveraging what we've learned, NHTSA has developed a plan to eliminate distraction-related crashes with an integrated approach that includes

research, laws, and high visibility enforcement to move us forward.

In 2009, NHTSA launched two pilot distracted driving enforcement programs in the communities of Hartford, Connecticut, and Syracuse, New York – two states with laws against texting and handheld cell phone use while driving. The pilots were intended to show whether stepped-up police enforcement could be effective in stopping this dangerous behavior behind the wheel.

Over the course of the year, the two communities supported the enforcement effort with media messages using NHTSA’s safety message *Phone in One Hand, Ticket in the Other*. This program followed the effective strategy of two other successful high visibility enforcement campaigns, *Click it or Ticket* and *Over the Limit, Under Arrest*.

The one-year study showed the rate of handheld phone use while driving dropped significantly in both jurisdictions. Syracuse showed an overall decrease of 32 percent in both handheld phone use and texting. Hartford showed an even more impressive 57 percent drop in handheld phone use and a stunning 72 percent drop in texting behind the wheel.

To date, 30 States plus D.C. ban all cell phone use by novice drivers and an additional 7 states prohibit text messaging by novice drivers. NHTSA supports the enactment of primary enforcement distracted driving laws that prevent drivers from texting while driving, and recommends that States prohibit novice drivers from using electronic communication devices during the learners and intermediate stages of a three-stage graduated driver license program.

On the outreach side, the Department created a website, Distraction.gov, which acts as a national clearinghouse for information on distracted driving. Distraction.gov contains valuable information that teens, parents, and schools can use to help stop teens from driving distracted. Examples include parent-teen driving contracts, brochures, signs, flyers and much more.

Recently, DOT and *Consumer Reports* partnered to educate parents, teachers, and teens about the dangers of distracted driving. A free guide called “Distracted Driving Shatters Lives” is also available at Distraction.gov.

I cannot thank each and every one of you enough for stepping up to do your part. As youth leaders and educators, your message will make a real difference with your peers. What you are doing makes our own efforts in research, enforcement, and outreach that much more

effective. Together we can save lives and protect our friends, families and communities. Thank you.

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