

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

**Distracted Driving Summit**

**Portland, Maine**

**February 16, 2011**

**“Hanging Up for Safety”**

Thank you, Senator Diamond, for your welcome and the invitation to be here. It is a pleasure and an honor for me to join you for this event.

Secretary LaHood is extremely disappointed that his schedule prevented him from being here to support you in person. But you have his, and the entire Department of Transportation’s support in your efforts to stop Distracted Driving.

Why are we so concerned about this issue? During 2009 alone, 5,474 people were killed on U.S. roadways and an estimated additional 448,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes that were reported to have involved distracted driving.

For Americans in almost every age group between 3 and 33, the leading cause of death is motor vehicle crashes. And the danger is especially great for teenagers. The age group with the greatest proportion of distracted drivers was the under-20 age group – 16 percent of all drivers younger than 20 involved in fatal crashes were reported to have been distracted while driving.

It is good kids, great kids ... all kinds of kids... making bad decisions ... and dying. Because staying alive on the road has everything to do with the choices we make when we get behind the wheel.

I find this especially heartbreaking because we all know that every one of these tragic losses is unnecessary. Crashes caused by distracted drivers are 100 percent preventable.

But we're all guilty. You see it every day: Drivers swerving in their lanes, stopping at green lights, running red ones, or narrowly missing a pedestrian because they have their eyes and minds on their hand held device, not the road. When they are behind the wheel, drivers should be focused on driving. Keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the steering wheel.

The Department has taken the lead and engaged in an all-out assault on this problem. Under the leadership of Secretary LaHood, the Department has been on a rampage against distracted driving for the last two years – with special emphasis on preventing texting and talking on the phone.

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

The good news is, this experience shows that drivers can and do change their behavior over time. So to that end, we have developed a plan to eliminate distraction-related crashes. We have come up with an integrated approach that includes research, laws, and High Visibility Enforcement to move us forward.

We are having an impact. From 2005 to 2008, distraction-related deaths as a proportion of all traffic fatalities jumped from 10 percent to 16 percent. In 2009, for the first time in four years, that percentage leveled off. That leveling off coincided with our national anti-distracted driving campaign, other public education efforts, and an increasing number of state anti-distracted driving laws.

In April of last year, we launched a distracted driving campaign with the tagline "Phone in One Hand, Ticket in the Other" in Hartford, Connecticut and Syracuse, New York.

After the second of four planned waves of program implementation, we found hand-held cell phone use had dropped 56 percent in Hartford and 38 percent in Syracuse; and texting while driving had declined 68 percent in Hartford and 42 percent in Syracuse.

Those stats forcefully dispel the notion, expounded on by some, that anti-texting laws cannot be effectively enforced. Captain Trice, of the Syracuse, New York, Police Department, manages operations of the Syracuse pilot project.

Captain Trice points out that there are enforcement methods that work, and they are straightforward. Officers need to use effective patrol strategies, look for

behavior indicators in drivers, and know their local roads and where to look for cell phone use and texting.

The numbers also tell us that efforts to raise public awareness, enact tough laws, and step up enforcement can make a difference and save lives.

The Department is moving forward in some other areas and I'd like to tell you where we are with some of our other anti-distraction activities. The Department has twice now, brought together experts and advocates for national summits on this issue. We've produced Public Service Announcements and maintained a strong dialogue with the media to try to get the message out to the general public.

We have made it clear that all of these actions are the beginning stages of the solutions needed to raise awareness and sharpen the consequences for those who choose to drive distracted.

An estimated 20 percent of the 1.52 million injury crashes in 2009 involved distracted driving. Distractions, such as cell phone use and texting, are enticing and readily accessible and are a factor in many crashes involving younger drivers, especially those less than 20 years old. But drivers of all ages are at risk.

NHTSA, along with a number of safety and enforcement groups, and manufacturers, developed sample legislation that States can use as a starting point to craft laws prohibiting texting while driving. Eleven states took that step last year.

So far, 30 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 applaud you here in Maine for taking on this issue.

We've asked for \$50 million dollars in next year's budget for an incentive grant program to encourage more States to pass these laws.

We're taking steps to obtain more accurate and better data to define the size and nature of crashes related to distraction. We're looking at improving crash and citation data through enhanced police reporting. We are also looking to various technology solutions, including cell phone filters or blocker systems as well as systems that can detect distracted driving and warn the driver. Lastly, we are developing manufacturer's guidelines for in-vehicle communication systems.

Our sister Agency, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, is using its existing authority to prohibit commercial interstate truck and bus drivers from texting while driving.

President Obama is making sure that Federal employees and contractors practice what we preach. He issued an Executive Order that prohibits all Federal workers from text messaging while driving on the job, and from using government-issued Blackberrys and other devices while driving during off-duty hours.

On the outreach side, the Department has created a website, [distraction.gov](http://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 eliminate this deadly practice.

About a year ago, Secretary LaHood and National Safety Council President Janet Froetscher helped launch FocusDriven, the first national nonprofit organization devoted specifically to raising awareness about the dangers of Distracted Driving.

FocusDriven is headed by Jennifer Smith, who has been an outspoken advocate against Distracted Driving since her mother was killed in 2008 by someone talking on his cell phone while driving.

We have come a long way on this issue in a very short time, but we still have far to go. And I want to commend Senator Diamond and each of you for stepping up to try and do their part to keep their families, friends, and neighbors safe.

Thank you

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