

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

**Consumer Federation of America  
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**“Evolving the Safety Dialog”**

**Good morning. I thank you for the invitation to be a part of this important discussion about consumer protection. It is a topic that rules my daily life.**

**When I was a kid, my mother had a Lincoln Mark VII... (tell your story)**

**Parents today wouldn't dream of letting their kids ride in the car in anything but their child safety seat or booster or strapped in with a seat belt. We know what the risks would be, and, we're unwilling to take that chance with our kids.**

**How did we get from the free-wheeling days of kids riding unrestrained in cars – draped across rear seat backs looking out the windows, playing in the cargo areas of station wagons, in parents' laps in the front seat – to child safety restraints? It took leadership and constant interaction between the public, the safety advocates, and the government. It took listening, and**

**learning about what risks we, as a society were and were not willing to take.**

**It took an evolving safety dialog to save children's lives. And we have. From 1975 through 2009, an estimated 9,310 lives were saved by child restraints – either a child safety seat or an adult seat belt. In 2009 alone, among children under the age of 5, an estimated 309 lives were saved by restraint use.**

**It didn't happen overnight. The first mandatory child restraint use law was implemented in the State of Tennessee in 1978. Since 1985, all 50 States and the District of Columbia have had child restraint use laws in effect. So it took 7 years for all the States to get a law on the books to protect children in passenger vehicles.**

**We're now on the threshold of a brand new conversation about safety with the public, and it revolves around safe vehicle designs and emerging technologies. We know it took decades to convince the**

**American Public that crashworthiness was key, but now we wholly embrace the idea. The next safety frontier involves technology and crash avoidance. NHTSA took the lead on this when we rolled out our enhanced government 5-star safety ratings system with the 2011 model year vehicles.**

**Among the things we changed – We added a family of crash test dummies and a side impact pole test. We established an overall safety score that will combine the star ratings from the front, side, and rollover programs. And, we implemented a program that we hope will encourage the demand for and use of advanced crash avoidance technologies.**

**The key is a communications program to tell the American public what it all means. We want them to understand why some of the new ratings are lower but more rigorous, and that those lower star ratings do not mean the vehicles are less safe than they were a year ago.**

**Most importantly, we want the consumer to embrace crash avoidance technologies as a way to make them safer. We want terms like electronic stability control, lane departure warning, and forward collision warning to become part of the consumer's lexicon and comfort zone. We want to help them remain an active participant in the safety conversation. The conversation is going to get more complicated as newer and more sophisticated technologies emerge.**

**As vehicles continue to evolve, our concept of what is safe will change. Tomorrow's generation of drivers will have wholly different expectations of their vehicles than we do. And so the concept of "safety" will continue to vary by who you are and what level of risk you are willing to accept.**

**But, as part of a larger community, we must come to an agreement on what risk level we as a society find acceptable? I have my own opinion on this, and I suspect that you, as safety practitioners, do as well. But to answer that question for society, we need to stay engaged with each other, including especially**

**those who are not in the safety business. This includes the usual suspects – regulators, advocates, and manufacturers – as well as consumers and the general public. All of us must be involved so we can try to find the right balance of technology, regulation, and individual responsibility.**

**We know that the crashworthiness of vehicles is an essential element to help people survive crashes. But we also know that the vast majority of crashes occur because of dangerous behavior. I’m talking about drivers who make poor decisions, including driving drunk, driving while distracted, and speeding, to name a few.**

**NHTSA’s National Motor Vehicle Crash Causation Study showed that in about 95 percent of serious crashes driver error was attributed to the event that precipitated the crash. Our outreach to consumers in this area is well-known with our national high visibility enforcement campaigns.**

**We are also hopeful that we can harness technology to mitigate the effects of these risky behaviors. For example, in early 2008, NHTSA and the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety entered into a cooperative research agreement to look at in-vehicle technology to prevent alcohol-impaired driving. Through this effort, we are exploring the feasibility, understanding the potential benefits, and identifying the public policy challenges associated with a more widespread use of in-vehicle technology to prevent alcohol-impaired driving.**

**We are seeking to develop technologies that can accurately and reliably detect alcohol impairment and prevent impaired drivers from starting or operating their vehicle. Rather than focusing on police detecting and arresting impaired drivers on the road, this effort seeks to prevent an impaired driver from operating the vehicle.**

**This will be a long-term effort – but we are hopeful it will produce a technology that is completely invisible to the driver and could be widely installed on a voluntary, market-driven basis. We are now moving this technology out of the laboratory and into test**

**vehicles. If this technology proves effective, our task then becomes discussing this idea with the public.**

**At that point, once again, the safety dialog will change and society will have to answer the question of how safe they want to be from drunk drivers. Do we want to let technology determine whether or not someone can drive away in their car after consuming alcohol? Would we be willing to pay for that technology in a new vehicle? We will see. We're not there yet.**

**It is clear that we cannot regulate or legislate risk away. It's already illegal to engage in any of these dangerous behaviors while behind the wheel, yet people continue to break the law.**

**The fact that I am referring to my iPad to talk to you today probably gives me away as the techno-geek that I am. But I've got nothing on the generation of drivers coming up behind me. Their electronic gadgets, or should I say, mobile devices, are the lifeblood of that generation's entire social experience. You know it, I**

**know it, and we have to address this. This group demands to be connected at all times, and seemingly at all costs. Under Secretary LaHood's leadership, we are engaging them in a conversation about safety and distraction behind the wheel of a vehicle.**

**We are building momentum against Distracted Driving. In addition to reaching out to them, NHTSA is developing an evaluative framework for in-car technologies. 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 us to keep pace with the industry, rather than playing catch-up.**

**We will not take a back seat while new dashboard or handheld *infotainment* systems are introduced. These have too great a potential to create more and more distraction for the driver. As part of our NHTSA Distraction Plan we are taking a hard look at developing guidelines and requirements for these systems. We have challenged the auto industry and the cell phone industry to work collaboratively with us to**

**keep the driver focused on their required task: driving, and to keep them safe.**

**Ultimately, it is up to the driver to make safe choices when getting behind the wheel of a vehicle. But manufacturers can help by designing products with safety in mind, law enforcement can persuade them with high visibility enforcement, and we can educate them about the risks they are taking.**

**And in the near future, perhaps, the vehicle may step in to help as well. Our Vehicle Communications program includes vehicle-to-vehicle, as well as vehicle-to-infrastructure applications. We are extremely encouraged by the research, analysis of the safety data, and the ongoing human factors work that all point to vehicle-to-vehicle as the next major safety breakthrough. In fact, vehicle-to-vehicle safety applications could address 80 percent of vehicle crash scenarios involving non-impaired drivers.**

**Data leads us to believe that we have the opportunity to apply these technologies in ways that could significantly reduce the number of crashes, injuries and fatalities on our roadways. Vehicle-to-vehicle is one of the main focus areas of NHTSA's safety research program, and our plan is to have the research supply the data necessary to enable an agency regulatory decision in the 2013 timeframe.**

**The success of this program will ultimately rest on the human factors and how the driver interacts with the system: the interface. The interface must produce a quick and appropriate reaction from the driver, yet it cannot increase the potential for distraction.**

**Any new safety technology will be properly researched before it moves to implementation. The vehicle communication safety applications must be effective at improving safety while not causing unintended consequences. The non-safety applications must be implemented so as not to increase the driver's workload or distraction which could increase the crash risk.**

**At NHTSA, we are committed saving lives on the American roadway. Our core mission is the protection of the American public. And the American public expects that the decisions we make will protect them. I believe that keeping the American public informed and involved in the safety dialog is part and parcel of protecting them.**

**There's an old proverb that says, "He that would be a leader must be a bridge." NHTSA will be that bridge for the future. My door is open. I want to hear from all constituencies in the highway traffic safety equation. I want to turn up the tempo, and the volume, of the dialog about the future.**

**Thank you.**

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