

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

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Luncheon Keynote
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Good afternoon. Thank you, Kathleen, for your kind welcome, and for the invitation to be here. As members of the public affairs community, you know just how busy NHTSA has been for the last year. Between unintended acceleration, fuel economy standards, and distracted driving, to name a few

topics, the NHTSA Communications Team has been working nonstop for months.

We have had some very encouraging news to share, lately, on the highway safety front. And I feel very optimistic that we will make even further progress in the future.

We recently released highway safety projections for the first 6 months of 2010, and we estimate fatalities are down more than 9 percent from the same period in 2009. And, when combined with FHWA's early estimates of Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT), the fatality rate is also down nearly 9 percent. So, this

**progress in reducing fatalities comes even as
Americans are driving a greater number of miles.**

This is great news.

**But we must remain vigilant. There are heartbreaking
stories every day of crashes that didn't have to
happen. There is so much more progress to be made
on any number of fronts in highway safety, and we are
on the job.**

**Any highway safety discussion about the future
absolutely has to acknowledge the issue of Distracted
Driving. As you are all aware, Secretary LaHood has**

taken a personal interest and has been on what he describes as “a rampage” for the last year on this issue.

As the principal communicators in your organization, I know you can appreciate the effort involved in building public momentum against distraction.

Decades of experience with seat belts and drunk driving has taught us it takes a consistent 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 which includes a strong messaging element. Communication is key.

I view the distraction effort as nascent – it is in its early stages – sort of where seatbelts were in the 1980s. We are starting to see some laws enacted, the public is not quite ready to comply, and enforcement is in the pilot stages (2 pilots, to be exact). We had Vince and Larry, and they certainly helped us raise the profile on

belt use. But it took laws and High Visibility Enforcement to move us forward.

Thanks to our pilot programs, I think we have a very strong enforcement message already. We can prove that good laws coupled with tough enforcement and targeted communications can reduce deadly distracted driving behavior. In April, we launched “Phone in One Hand, Ticket in the Other” in Hartford, Connecticut and Syracuse, New York.

In the last six months alone, hand held cell phone use has dropped 56 percent in Hartford and 38 percent in

Syracuse; and texting while driving has declined 68 percent in Hartford and 42 percent in Syracuse.

And I think this is probably a good point to mention the Insurance Institute for Highway Studies' report that made the news, recently. Talk about keeping your media folks busy! You wouldn't know about the importance of good enforcement from reading IIHS's report. They did not address enforcement in their report, at all. Everyone in this room knows that good laws don't mean anything without tough enforcement.

To further underscore this point, our safety partners, including AAA, went on the record to reinforce our anti-distraction message. And I thank you for that.

For further proof, we can point to the numbers. From 2005 to 2008, distraction-related fatalities 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.

That tells us that – although distracted driving is still a massive epidemic – our efforts to raise public awareness, enact tough laws, and step up enforcement can make a difference and save lives.

We're having a bit more of a challenge on the social norming side. We've brought together focus groups across the country and we are trying to craft that message that can connect with drivers.

You know the message we are looking for – the one that resonates. For instance, we've told Americans to click it or get a ticket. And we've seen seatbelt use

increase to 85 percent, up from 60 percent only 15 years ago.

We've reminded Americans that if they're over the limit, they'll be under arrest. And although driving under the influence is still a serious problem, we've seen drunk driving fatalities decline by almost 20 percent between 2006 and 2009.

It's a work in progress, but I thought you might be interested to hear about a couple of things we captured from our Focus groups. We came up with hundreds of lines and ultimately tested nine lines.

Messages that received the best responses were the ones that dealt with distraction in general, and the ones that were specific to phones and texting, were perceived as too narrow in scope by most of the focus group participants. They easily understood distraction to be a wide-ranging activity that could literally be caused by anything in or around a vehicle.

Some of the more positive reactions were to messages that drove home the individual responsibility theme.

Interesting though most of the people in the groups did not see themselves in this behavior and if they did, it wasn't a problem for them. They could multi task with no problem. That is an area where we will

certainly look closely as we search for the message we will ultimately pick.

We will continue finessing the social norming message until we get it right. It is a vital part of our plan of attack on distraction.

We're moving forward in some other areas and I'd like to tell you where we are with some of the other anti-distraction pieces. The Department has twice now, brought together experts and advocates for national summits. We've produced Public Service Announcements and maintained a strong dialogue with the media.

We have made it clear that all of these actions are the beginning stages of the solution, or 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.

Distraction is most likely to be a factor in 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 have taken the step this year.

So far, 30 States plus D.C. and Guam 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.

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 improved crash and citation data through enhanced police reporting. We are looking to various technology solutions, as well, including cell phone filters or blocker systems that can detect distracted driving and warn the driver. Lastly, we are looking at developing manufacturer's guidelines for in-vehicle communication systems.

Our sister Agency, 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 workers 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 while using government-issued Blackberrys and other such devices during off-duty hours.

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.

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

This issue is being assimilated into the national popular culture—Distracted Driving has captured Oprah Winfrey’s attention; she’s launched her own campaign against texting and driving, and I just had the privilege of participating in your Two-Second Turnoff rally with Seventeen magazine.

Your organization has a long history of advocacy in favor of laws and policies that would help reduce distracted driving, and you are on the record with a campaign to enact anti-texting laws in all 50 States by 2013. I look forward to our continued collaboration. I am honored to be here to acknowledge and support your work. Thank you.

