

Remarks prepared for
David Strickland, Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
For the
Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority
53rd Biennial Boule
Palm Springs, California
July 20, 2010

Good morning. Thank you, International First Anti-Grand Basileus Herring. And thank you, Sigma Gamma Rho for the invitation to be a part of the 53rd Biennial Boule.

More importantly, thank you, on behalf of U.S.

**Transportation Secretary LaHood and the staff at the
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, for
reaching out to us as a partner in the fight against
Distracted Driving.**

**As you know, the Department has taken the lead and
engaged in an all-out assault on this problem, which
killed nearly 6,000 people and injured more than half
a million in 2008 – with new losses reported daily.**

The African American community is also at risk. It is why you are here. It is why I am here. These numbers are not statistics to us, they are people we know and care about. They are our friends and family members.

And what is especially heartbreaking is the knowledge that every one of these tragic losses is unnecessary.

Crashes caused by distracted drivers are 100 percent preventable.

Let me tell you about the bigger picture.

An estimated 21 percent of the 1.63 million injury crashes in 2008 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.

Last fall, the Department focused national attention on the dangers of Distracted Driving, and invited stakeholders to gather for a summit. From that springboard and with the continued leadership of Secretary LaHood, we've done a lot of work and focused a lot of attention on this issue in a very short time. But we are just getting started.

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 safety performance. The good news is, this experience shows that drivers can and do change their behavior over time.

We have developed a plan to eliminate distraction-related crashes. We can – and have – leveraged the wide range of talents and capabilities in our agency to come up with the integrated approaches reflected in our plan.

Some key pieces are in place already. For example, Syracuse, New York, and Hartford, Connecticut, each launched federally funded pilot programs to test the effectiveness of highly publicized law enforcement efforts to change driver behavior and get them to put down their cell phones. The pilots started this spring and will run for one year.

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 looking at improved crash and citation data through enhanced police reporting, and, we are looking to various technology solutions, as well, including cell phone filters, crash avoidance systems, and developing 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, or using a handheld cell phone.

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.

What these efforts share is the common mission of protecting and ensuring the future of our families, our communities, and our nation. This collaboration between NHTSA and Sigma Gamma Rho is crucial. Together, we can deliver the strong programs and messages that will help us change behavior patterns and educate African American drivers at risk.

Working together with you, we can make a difference in the African American community. Highway Safety is a particularly important issue for African Americans, but there is room for improvement. Seat belt use among African Americans was 75 percent in 2008, compared to the overall national average of 83 percent. As is true with all Americans, motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death for African Americans from age 1 through age 34. In 2006, more than 4,500 African Americans died in motor vehicle crashes, more than 12 people a day.

It was these kinds of numbers that led Sigma Gamma Rho to partner with us before. Because of the toll motor vehicle crashes take on the African American community, in 2000 the Meharry Medical College and the Department of Transportation sponsored a coalition to address seat belt use. Sigma Gamma Rho was a key partner in the Blue Ribbon Panel to Increase Safety Belt Use among African Americans.

We are extremely encouraged by your willingness to step up again, because we need your help to fight Distracted Driving. You have the influence and the ability to reach the African American population in a way that the Department does not. But we do have tools that can help you do this job.

How can we support you? NHTSA annually produces a report titled *Countermeasures That Work*. The report includes brief, non-technical discussions of various programs that States, localities and others can adopt to promote highway safety.

NHTSA is also working with the Meharry Medical College on developing a multi-cultural toolkit that will assist communities in adapting evidence-based strategies to suit their local situation.

We are currently pilot-testing the toolkit in Cleveland and Denver, and we plan to have it available for use in 2011.

There are things Sigma Gamma Rho can do immediately to start making an impact on Distracted Driving. For starters, you can adopt Distracted Driving policies and/or bans in your organization.

Long-term, you can educate your members about the dangers of Distracted Driving. It could be as simple as directing them to distraction.gov, for starters, or availing yourselves of the material on distraction.gov to share with them. You can advocate for strong anti-distracted driving laws in States that have not yet enacted a law.

As community leaders, your leadership is critical to the success of this effort. By asking to partner with us to help reduce a dangerous behavior on our roadways, you are leading by example and proving once again, that the first line of defense is personal responsibility... Each one of us stepping forward to do our part.

The Secretary of Transportation has made safety a priority for the Department, and Distracted Driving a personal cause. Sigma Gamma Rho, you have the support and gratitude of the Secretary and the entire Department of Transportation for speaking up and joining us in the fight to stop Distracted Driving.

Thank you.