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**Testimony of
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Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
“Improving Roadway Safety: Assessing the Effectiveness of
NHTSA’s Highway Traffic Safety Programs”
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Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Duncan, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting AAA to be here today to share our perspective on roadway safety.

As you may know, AAA is a federation of motor clubs in the U.S. and Canada serving over 51 million members. Our members are prime users of the nation’s surface transportation system. They are commuters, leisure travelers, pedestrians, and users of public transportation. Transportation plays a vital role in their lives and, of course, underpins the economic well-being of this nation.

AAA’s interest in the transportation system has always been focused on safety and personal mobility. We face serious challenges with the number of crashes, injuries and deaths on our roadways, and the increasing congestion that disrupts our daily lives and economic activity. As you prepare for the upcoming reauthorization of SAFETEA-LU, I would also suggest that an added challenge will be getting the public’s buy-in regarding the importance of transportation and what needs to be done. If we fail to understand the amount of mistrust the public has in our ability to deliver recognizable transportation improvements and be good stewards of the motorist’s dollar, we will fail in reducing fatalities, fail in cutting commute times, and fail to grow our economy in ways that keep us globally competitive.

In my testimony today, I would like to spend a little time outlining in greater detail some of the many challenges we face in transportation safety, particularly on the behavioral side, and then offer some recommendations for your consideration.

A thorough examination of behavioral safety and NHTSA’s programs is appropriate. Behavior change is arguably the greatest challenge we face in reducing the staggering number of fatalities and must be a critical component of future programs. In a time of limited resources, we need to determine what works, which approaches and interventions provide the biggest return on investment, and focus those limited resources where they will provide the greatest public good.

In cases where we have already identified countermeasures that work, what is most needed is the political will to act.

A lot of good work is being done to think about how best to reform federal transportation programs, including traffic safety. AAA agrees that moving toward performance-driven, outcome-based programs is the way to go. We recognize that's easier said than done, but an effort must be made to change the status quo.

There has been significant debate about combating congestion, improving freight mobility and expanding transportation options. This committee certainly has heard some of that debate. Transportation advocates on all sides have called for abandoning the status quo and developing a new vision and purpose for the federal program. They've also talked about the need for more resources. There has been little public discussion, though, about the role of safety in the federal transportation program. This hearing is a promising start to launch that dialogue and AAA is especially pleased to be a part of it. We'd suggest the creativity and energy being applied to mobility and congestion solutions should also be applied to doing things better for traffic safety.

Public Health Challenge

Part of "doing things better for traffic safety" is changing the way we view traffic crashes. They are not random occurrences. There are reasons they happen and things can be done to prevent them and reduce their impact. They should be recognized as a public health threat and treated as such.

You are all familiar with the statistics – over 42,000 people die each year in the U.S. as a result of motor vehicle crashes. That's about 117 deaths per day, and nearly 5 every hour. Millions more are injured each year. While concern over the high number of fatalities on our roadways seems to be strong among safety organizations, the research community and in all levels of government, we seem to be stalled in our efforts to save lives. Annual deaths have remained stuck above 40,000 for many years. This should ring alarm bells nationwide for an urgent call to action. Yet our society seems to have come to accept this sort of death toll with car crashes. This has to change.

Earlier this year, AAA joined with Cambridge Systematics to conduct a first-of-its kind study of the societal costs of crashes as compared to congestion. The report calculates the costs of crashes for the same metropolitan areas covered by the well-known *Urban Mobility Report* conducted by the Texas Transportation Institute. We found the societal cost of crashes is a staggering \$164.2 billion annually in the urban areas studied, nearly two and a half times greater than the \$67.6 billion price tag for congestion.

In every metropolitan area studied, from very large to small, the results showed crash costs exceeded congestion costs. For very large urban areas (more than 3 million), crash costs are nearly double those of congestion. Those costs rise to more than seven times congestion costs in small urban areas (less than 500,000) where congestion is less of a challenge. The \$164.2 billion cost for crashes equates to an annual per person cost of \$1,051, compared to \$430 per person annually for congestion. These safety costs include medical, emergency and police services, property damage, lost productivity, and quality of life, among other things. This analysis wasn't done to downplay the need to reduce congestion and apply new resources to improving mobility; instead, AAA wants similar concern, attention, and resources to be brought to safety improvements.

Safety Culture

Fatality, injury and cost figures provide ample evidence as to the impact of traffic crashes on our society, but the public is not getting the message, changing its behavior or demanding action from elected officials. To this end, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has initiated a long-term research initiative to assess and eventually transform the “traffic safety culture” in this country. When we speak of traffic safety culture we envision a society where everyone would value safety, do their part, engage in serious public dialogue to seek ways to continually improve traffic safety, and demand that all other members do as well.

To give you a sense of the challenge, a recent AAA Foundation survey of public attitudes, beliefs and behaviors toward traffic safety found that, to a large degree, Americans practice a “do as I say, not as I do” approach. They agree, for example, that engaging in distracting behavior while driving is dangerous, yet they admit to doing it, and firmly believe the driver in the other car is the real problem. The survey found that over 80 percent believe distraction is a serious problem, yet over 50 percent said they had talked on a cell phone and 14 percent said they texted while driving in the last 30 days.

Speeding, aggressive driving, impaired driving, distracted driving, seat belt use, and pedestrian and cyclist safety are just some of the issues that can benefit from an improved safety culture on our roads.

Safety Challenges

Let me briefly share AAA’s thoughts on some of the issues just cited, highlighting three age groups of road users – child passengers, teen drivers, and seniors – where AAA has focused its efforts during recent years.

We’ve made substantial progress improving child safety seat use for infants and toddlers. Some loopholes remain to be closed in state laws, but usage rates are high and death rates have fallen considerably through the work of AAA, SafeKids, the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, NHTSA, and others. Yet, more often than not, we see these seats being misused. Booster seat usage and laws remain uneven across the states and socioeconomic groups. Much can still be done to save lives and reduce injuries to our youngest passengers by improving state booster seat laws and implementing effective behavior change programs that target populations with low usage.

Fast forward a decade to when those booster seat age kids reach driving age. AAA, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, NTSB, and others have been working for more than a decade to successfully expand graduated driver licensing (GDL) for teen drivers from just 8 states in 1998 to all 50 in 2005. Recent AAA Foundation research shows that states with robust GDL systems have seen a 38 percent drop in fatality rates and a 40 percent drop in serious injury rates, yet just one state – Delaware – has all the GDL components that AAA and other safety advocates call for. Teen drivers continue to crash and die at rates more than double their share of the driving population. Car crashes far and away remain the leading killer of teens. Here, too, more can be done. States need to improve their GDL programs. We need to find ways to engage parents in the development of their new teen drivers. We need to figure out how driver education can better produce safe teen drivers. Significant work is being done by the AAA Foundation and others to improve driver education, but more resources are needed.

On the other end of the age spectrum, senior drivers pose a looming challenge for both traffic safety and mobility. It's estimated that by the year 2025, 25 percent of licensed drivers will be age 65 or older. We know that many of them will drive, and that many of them will be safe drivers. AAA, AARP, and others are developing programs to reach seniors and help them gauge their driving abilities and find ways to stay mobile as they age. Yet as this population grows and expects more out of their golden years, there will be more need for ways to assess driving ability, to adapt their vehicles to fit their changing bodies, and provide supplemental transportation programs to keep them mobile once their driving days have passed. While most of this work will be done at the state and local level, federal involvement is important to provide leadership and guidance on licensing policies (NHTSA) and support for mobility options (DOT).

Alcohol-impaired driving continues to be a huge problem with over 14,000 alcohol-involved drivers in fatal crashes in 2006. AAA has worked with MADD, the Century Council, NHTSA, and others to improve laws and reduce drunk driving. Yet the challenge of repeat offenders, high BAC offenders, and drunk driving among young adults remains. AAA suggests that a systematic approach to addressing the problem is required. This includes focusing on improving existing procedures and processes, like taking a collaborative, cross-discipline approach to substance abuse issues; increasing criminal justice education in drunk driving; encouraging physician screening for alcohol abuse; stiffening BAC-test refusal penalties; evaluating effectiveness of specialized prosecutors and DWI courts; and building and evaluating model initiatives to reduce recidivism rates.

Distracted driving has garnered perhaps the most attention with media, the public, and state legislators and poses challenges for safety advocates. Five states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws to ban handheld cell phone use by drivers and there are now four states that have passed laws to ban text messaging by drivers. Yet there's little evidence that these laws have changed behavior or crash rates so far. You can't legislate away the myriad distractions both inside and outside the vehicle. Laws can provide one tool for police and prosecutors. They also serve as a device for communicating safety priorities to drivers. Distracted driving is a challenge for legislators, researchers, engineers, and others, but for motorists, it probably fits best into the need to improve our safety culture.

AAA Recommendations for Change

AAA offers the following recommendations for consideration as you evaluate existing programs and look for new opportunities to improve transportation safety:

- **Data** – We need an increased focus on results and metrics in order to properly evaluate current safety programs so we invest in those projects and programs that are truly having an impact. Without good data, we can't measure what's working. A recent GAO report found the quality of state data systems was inconsistent. Data systems must be improved and money should be provided for necessary upgrades. Developing a common definition for serious injuries should also be a priority. Collecting data on deaths and serious injuries would provide a more robust metric and afford greater statistical validity of any analyses done.
- **Accountability** – In order to move to a performance-driven, outcome-based system, new performance metrics are needed. In the behavioral arena, NHTSA and GHSA are working to develop comprehensive performance metrics to evaluate all federal program expenditures for traffic safety and we support this effort. Uniform performance standards will reveal to each

state what its own data collection needs are and will help each state evaluate its current behavioral safety programs. Absent these measures, it is extremely difficult for a state to determine exactly how best to apply the most effective solutions. Performance standards should be a prerequisite for any new system providing additional flexibility to state and local authorities.

- Funding – In order to do the types of program evaluations and data collections that will be required to make significant strides in safety, more money is needed. Discussions in other countries and among international development organizations like the World Bank have focused on a goal of ensuring at least 10 percent of all transportation investments are dedicated to safety. AAA believes this funding target warrants consideration here in the U.S.
- Communication – The transportation safety community needs to develop more effective ways of getting the public to understand the impact of traffic crashes, the need for effective countermeasures, and the role their own behavior plays in safety.
- Collaboration – Increased collaboration among traffic safety professionals, public health specialists, and health communications experts is needed to incorporate the best available science on behavior modification. We also need to escape our current silo-mentality and coordinate inter-agency and inter-disciplinary communications more effectively. Cooperation and joint planning at all levels of government between health, transportation, and criminal justice system professionals will help restore trust, create accountability, and deliver success.
- Strategic Highway Safety Plans – AAA encourages Congress to continue and strengthen the requirement for states to develop collaborative strategic highway safety plans that are based on data. Once in place, there should be oversight to ensure that programs are actually accomplishing the plans’ goals. It’s important for NHTSA and state highway safety officers to be actively engaged in the development and evaluation of these plans.
- Road Assessment Programs – Further testing and implementation of a road risk assessment tool, e.g., U.S. Road Assessment Program (usRAP), should be encouraged to ensure dollars are spent on roads and bridges with the greatest safety problems. Understanding road safety risks will help state DOTs focus on solutions that will have the greatest safety benefits and should result in broader public support for needed improvements.¹

One final suggestion is for Congress to consider an ambitious federal grant program for safety that is akin to what the Department of Transportation has been promoting for congestion relief. Just as the DOT’s Urban Partnership program has encouraged local governments to compete for large grants to address congestion issues, so, too, could a federal grant program offer larger pots of money to individual states or cities for properly-evaluated safety programs. Making significant strides in safety will involve more than incremental improvements or providing a bit more money to carry on “business as usual.” The federal role can include helping state and local safety professionals try dramatically different, large scale programs and rigorously evaluate them for lessons that can be applied across the country and to other safety issues.

¹ The U.S. Road Assessment Program (usRAP) is a pilot program of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, built upon successful programs already established in Europe (EuroRAP) and Australia (AusRAP). usRAP produces color-coded risk maps that display the crash rates and crash densities of roads, derived from historical crash data and traffic volume data, and also “star ratings” that communicate the relative safety of the physical characteristics and safety features of the roads, which are assessed through physical inspection of the roads. By the end of 2008, usRAP will have been successfully piloted in eight states and the AAA Foundation is prepared to initiate implementation of a nationwide system in 2009.

Perhaps a state could significantly reduce drunk driving through a comprehensive program aimed at monitoring and treatment of offenders, coupled with additional resources for law enforcement and the judiciary. Another state might be able to significantly improve teen driver safety through a major overhauling of its teen licensing system, engaging parents, and providing innovative driver training using simulators or other technology. This type of grant program could let us take ambitious steps to address some of the great safety challenges our nation faces and adopt effective solutions.

This wouldn't mean ending high visibility enforcement programs for seat belts and drunk driving. It wouldn't dry up funds provided to states for other safety programs. But it would be focused on measurable results directly linked to safety using new performance metrics. It's no longer enough for a program simply to raise awareness of a safety issue – it must lead to real crash reductions or related behavior change. The cause of safety is best served by focusing money on programs proven to accomplish real safety goals.

Conclusion

AAA recognizes that the challenges before you are not easy. The prospect of completely reforming the federal transportation program in one year's time makes the challenges associated with getting SAFETEA-LU passed seem minor. But this re-examination is long past due and is imperative if we want the public's buy-in going forward. We look forward to working with all of you over the next 18 months to accomplish the important task of improving transportation safety in the next transportation reauthorization bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.