



Highlights of [GAO-08-398](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

In 2005, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) included authorizations of nearly \$2.2 billion for safety incentive grant programs to assist states in their efforts to reduce traffic fatalities.

Administered by the Department of Transportation's (DOT) National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), five of these programs provide incentive grants to states to implement legislation governing the use of safety belts and child safety seats, and promote activities to reduce alcohol-impaired driving, improve motorcycle training and awareness, and improve traffic safety information systems. To help Congress prepare for the reauthorization of the surface transportation programs in 2009, this report provides information on (1) NHTSA's status in awarding and overseeing states' use of these five grants programs, (2) activities states have conducted using the grants and issues they have faced in applying for and implementing the grants, and (3) how NHTSA plans to evaluate the results of the grant programs and implications for reauthorizing the programs.

To conduct this work, GAO interviewed DOT and state officials, analyzed safety reports from 50 states, and analyzed grant data from DOT and 7 selected states.

DOT officials generally agreed with the findings of the report and offered technical corrections that were incorporated, as appropriate.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-398](#). For more information, contact Katherine A. Siggerud at (202) 512-6570 or [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov).

## TRAFFIC SAFETY

### Grants Generally Address Key Safety Issues, Despite State Eligibility and Management Difficulties

#### What GAO Found

In fiscal years 2006 and 2007, NHTSA awarded about \$575 million to states for the five safety incentive grant programs; NHTSA uses several oversight processes to determine the extent to which states are meeting safety-related performance goals and to monitor how the states spend grant funds. The number of states receiving the grants generally remained constant or increased from fiscal year 2006 to 2007, although the extent to which states qualified for the different grant programs varied. For example, in 2006, 22 states received the Safety Belt Use grant and 5 states received the Child Safety and Child Booster Seat Use grant because not all states were able to pass the laws that the grant programs required, while the majority of states received the other grants. To oversee states' use of grants, NHTSA uses a performance-based approach to assess state progress toward meeting safety goals and complements this assessment with oversight processes that monitor whether states are accomplishing the tasks that will allow the state to achieve its goals. This approach allows NHTSA to be involved throughout the lifecycle of state grants. In response to a mandate to evaluate the effectiveness of NHTSA's oversight process, GAO plans to issue a report in July 2008.

States are planning and implementing safety improvement activities using grant funds, but the structure of the grant programs has created eligibility and management difficulties for states. The activities generally fall within five categories—education and training, media and public information, enforcement, data and technology, and infrastructure improvements. Safety officials GAO spoke with in seven selected states agree that the safety incentive grant programs are assisting states in implementing activities that address key safety issues and meeting goals and performance measures established in state highway safety plans. However, state safety officials also noted difficulties in passing laws to meet eligibility requirements for some grant programs, as well as managing grant applications, deadlines, and timing. For example, not all states have passed a primary safety belt law, which allows law enforcement officers to stop a driver for not wearing a safety belt and is required to qualify for a Safety Belt Use grant. The selected states have also had difficulty managing the multiple grant applications, which are all due within a 3-month period. NHTSA officials acknowledge state officials' concerns but noted they cannot address the concerns because the difficulties stem from the grant requirements established in SAFETEA-LU.

NHTSA plans to develop additional performance measures to evaluate the results of these grant programs, but state performance is generally not tied to receipt of the grants; the absence of such performance accountability mechanisms as well as issues described above that states face in using grants raise implications for reauthorization. Congress will be faced with deciding whether the grant programs could be designed differently to allow states more flexibility in using grant funds and to focus more specifically on performance accountability, as some have advocated. However, these changes would require improved safety data and a robust accountability system.