



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**National Highway
Traffic Safety
Administration**

Administrator

1200 New Jersey Avenue SE.
Washington, DC 20590

January 30, 2008

Dear Colleagues:

Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 is underway and the time has come to focus our attention and energies on improving safety performance this FY and planning for sustained safety gains as we prepare, with our State partners, for FY 2009. The upcoming fiscal year is scheduled to be the final year of SAFETEA-LU and we look forward to finishing this authorization period with strong performance gains as we prepare for reauthorization.

The most visible measure of our program, the number of people killed in motor vehicle crashes, fell by 2 percent in 2006, while injuries fell by 4.6 percent. This was the largest decrease in the last ten years, and is a reflection of your hard work, and the work of many other highway safety professionals. Other safety and management measures also improved last year. Seat belt use increased to 82 percent in 2007. Participation in our high visibility enforcement campaigns reached the highest level ever. Maine became our newest primary belt law State, and Indiana eliminated the pickup truck exemption from its seat belt use law.

Overall trends are positive, but progress has stalled in some areas. Even with the drop in fatalities in 2006, 42,642 people lost their lives in traffic fatalities, an average of more than 115 deaths per day. In 2006, over 13,000 people were killed in crashes in which a driver or motorcyclist had a blood alcohol content (BAC) level of .08 or more; 13,500 were killed in speeding related crashes, and 15,500 victims were unrestrained. Motorcycle fatalities increased for the ninth consecutive year, a total increase of 127 percent over ten years, and now account for almost 11 percent of all highway fatalities, the highest level ever. These numbers indicate that there is much left for us at NHTSA, and the larger highway safety community to do in saving lives and reducing injuries due to crashes.

In administering our programs, we remain committed to being data-driven and science-based. In order to have measurable impact on highway safety problems, and to be good stewards of scarce taxpayer resources, we must focus our efforts where the largest problems exist and, to the fullest extent possible, implement countermeasure strategies that have been shown to be effective.

★★★★★
NHTSA
www.nhtsa.gov

Under the umbrella of these guiding principles, we believe the Nation can achieve the largest measure of progress in improving highway safety by focusing our efforts primarily in four areas: *occupant protection, impaired driving, motorcycle safety, and effective program management and oversight*. While focusing our attention on our largest safety problems, this list of priority areas is not intended to preclude efforts in other countermeasure areas (e.g. speeding, older driver, youth, pedestrian) based on documented highway safety problems in each State and the availability of safety strategies with promise to address those problems.

While seat belt use is at record levels, more than 5,000 additional lives could have been saved by higher seat belt use in 2006. With this dramatic potential, we need to redouble our efforts to raise seat belt use, using approaches focused on specific States and populations. Twenty-four States would benefit both from a safety perspective and financially from enacting primary belt laws (PBL). States that upgrade to a PBL can expect to increase safety belt usage by an average of 8 percentage points and save many lives each year. In the final two years of SAFETEA-LU and the Section 406 Safety Belt Performance Grant program, we must renew and expand our efforts to promote enactment of primary seat belt use laws in the States. In all States, primary and secondary, belt use increases with sustained, widespread enforcement, coupled with targeted communication campaigns.

Belt use varies among demographic groups, so while PBLs and our *Click it or Ticket* campaign continue to be our primary strategies, additional focused efforts may be needed in specific States or communities. For example, demonstration projects have shown that targeted enforcement and communication campaigns can increase rural and pickup truck belt use rates. Including specific consequences for belt law violations in Graduated Drivers License programs appears to increase young driver belt use.

With more than 13,000 deaths related to a driver or motorcyclist operating a vehicle at BAC levels above the legal limit, we will be unable to make serious progress in highway safety without reducing impaired driving. Unfortunately, after making considerable progress through the mid 1990s, the number of fatalities in alcohol-involved crashes has since remained stubbornly stable.

To reduce impaired driving, we need to continue to focus on our best current evidence-based strategies, and continue looking for effective new approaches. One promising tactic is ignition interlocks, which have proven effective in deterring crashes while installed on offenders' vehicles. However, most State interlock programs need improvement to fully deploy the devices and realize this life-saving potential. The comprehensive impaired driving demonstration in New Mexico is another promising strategy. We are working with officials in New Mexico to document their use of a statewide task force to develop a comprehensive impaired driving system, and how this comprehensive program contributed to their declining fatality rates. We need to transfer information about the lessons of the New Mexico experience to other States as it becomes available.

While exploring these promising new strategies, we need to continue to implement approaches that have proven effective in reducing impaired driving, especially high-visibility law enforcement (HVE). The *Drunk Driving. Over the Limit. Under Arrest* campaign is the cornerstone of our impaired driving countermeasure program, and the combination of heightened enforcement and targeted communications remains our gold standard. Active law enforcement participation is the key to success of high-visibility enforcement and we need to continue working with States to improve recruitment for both our alcohol crackdown and seat belt enforcement mobilization efforts.

While progress in impaired driving and occupant protection has been uneven, motorcycle fatalities have skyrocketed: 4,810 people died in motorcycle crashes in 2006, and 88,000 were injured. Fatalities were up 5 percent from 2005, and 127 percent since 1997. Clearly, we are not going to make significant progress in reducing fatalities and injuries without reversing the increase in motorcycle crashes.

The agency remains committed to increasing use of FMVSS 218 compliant helmets by all riders on every ride. In addition to promoting increased helmet use, there are a variety of other activities we can champion, many of which are included in the Department's recently issued Motorcycle Action Plan. We can help motor vehicle administrators establish systems to assure that riders are properly trained and licensed, and make sure that motorcycles are specifically addressed in impaired driving/riding HVE campaigns. There is no silver bullet to address motorcycle crashes; we must continue to press for small changes which together have the potential to reverse the decade-long increase in fatalities.

While impaired driving, occupant protection and motorcycles pose the most significant Nationwide safety challenges, other concerns may be equally or more significant in some States and regions. As a data-driven organization, we need to focus on the safety priorities identified through analysis of State data and safety trends in our individual jurisdictions. A cookie-cutter approach will not work, and we must combine our focus on national priorities and high-risk populations with identified State safety problems.

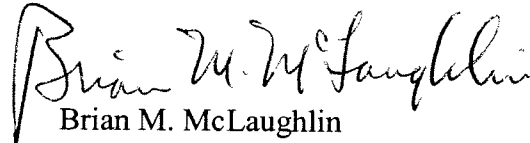
Finally, I want to reiterate the agency's commitment to maintain our strong management role, including financial oversight and programmatic assistance to the States. This entails being vigilant stewards of Federal grant funds, as well as providing ideas, assistance, and best practices to States as they develop and implement their highway safety programs.

NHTSA transfers over \$600 million to the States annually to promote highway safety, and it is incumbent on us to assure that Federal funds are spent efficiently, effectively, expeditiously, and in accordance with the State Highway Safety Plan, national goals, guidelines and procedures. We cannot simply award grants, we must provide active oversight and assistance, including: promoting technology transfer, providing programmatic advice, coordinating efforts within and

between States, and performing management reviews and special management reviews. Our success in reducing crashes ultimately depends on the quality of our leadership and technical assistance, as well as the actions of State and local officials, and non-governmental partners. A significant component of our job is to help them through leadership, proactive and thoughtful program and technical advice, and management support.

We have a challenging year ahead of us, but I believe we are well positioned for success. We have a strong, experienced Departmental leadership team that is committed to highway safety, and has worked hard to provide us the resources we need. We also have committed partners in the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, and we must continue to work with them and the States to implement State strategic highway safety plans. Most important, we have a dedicated, professional, and conscientious staff that works very hard to promote highway safety. The success of this agency in achieving its life-saving highway-safety mission is largely in your hands. I want to applaud you for your professionalism and hard work, and thank you in advance for all your efforts this year and into the future to save lives.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian M. McLaughlin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B".

Brian M. McLaughlin
Senior Associate Administrator
Traffic Injury Control