



Testimony before the House Transportation and Justice Subcommittee
Brian Newbacher, director of public affairs, AAA East Central
Tuesday, Feb. 17, 2009

Good afternoon Chairman Ujvagi and members of the subcommittee. My name is Brian Newbacher and I am here today on behalf of AAA to speak in support of primary seat belts. As you may know, 25 states, including Ohio, still need to strengthen their seat belt laws. As a result, AAA has joined with the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), and the National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA) to advocate for primary belt laws across the country. (news release attached)

Primary enforcement seat belt laws have been shown to increase seat belt usage by an average of 11 percentage points, which saves lives, reduces injuries and lowers crash costs to society.

NHTSA estimates that if Ohio were to pass a primary seat belt law, belt usage would rise by about 7 percentage points. Based on this likely increase in usage rates, Ohio would save 64 lives with a primary law, prevent 1,574 serious injuries and save \$280 million in costs on an annual basis. In fact, traffic crashes cost Ohioans \$11 Billion each year in medical expense, lost productivity, property damage and related costs—that's \$977 for every Ohio resident. In 2007, 909 people died while riding in cars and light trucks in Ohio. Of these, 59 percent were not wearing their seat belts.

Opposition to a primary seatbelt law includes the argument that government should not intrude on a citizen's personal choice whether or not to buckle up. AAA believes it's actually an imposition on others' rights when society is forced to pay more money for health care for people who don't buckle up.

According to NHTSA, the average charge for an unbelted passenger to an inpatient facility as a result of a crash injury was more than 55 percent greater than the average charge for those who were belted. Driving on the roads is a privilege. Therefore, enforcing the safety belt law in the same manner as other traffic laws does not infringe on liberty.

When we share the public roadways and when we expect the assistance of police and other emergency responders, we should expect that others have taken the simplest and most effective precaution to death and injury—by buckling up.

Research also disputes the belief that standard seat belt laws may contribute to the harassment of African-Americans. According to the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, studies of states that changed from a secondary to a primary law found either no difference in the rate of white versus non-white ticketing or they found a greater increase in the proportion of Caucasians ticketed after the enactment of a standard law.

The quickest and least expensive way for Ohio to reduce highway fatalities immediately is by enacting a primary law. That's why AAA supports a Primary Seatbelt Law for Ohio. Fast passage also will provide Ohio with nearly \$27 million dollars in new incentive funds that can be used for highway repairs, construction and public information campaigns. That's a great economic reason to do the right thing during these tough economic times. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of this lifesaving measure.



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**Strengthening Safety Belt Laws Will Save Lives and
Bring Additional Federal Funding to States
*But States Need to Act Soon***

Washington, DC – Many states with record budget shortfalls could receive additional federal safety improvement and infrastructure funding, while saving lives, by strengthening their safety belt laws. But they need to act soon, according to a coalition of auto-related groups. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, AAA, the National Automobile Dealers Association and the National Safety Council are calling on state legislators to pass “primary enforcement” safety belt laws so they will qualify for the federal incentives, which can be up to \$35.5 million, depending on a state’s population and its current belt usage. The incentive grants are set to expire June 30. If all of these states upgraded their laws, hundreds of lives would be saved each year.

“Safety belts have been called the most effective safety technology in history, in terms of their ability to reduce serious and fatal injuries in motor vehicle crashes,” said Dave McCurdy, president and CEO of the Auto Alliance.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that passage of primary safety belt laws in these states would save at least 737 lives, prevent 10,861 injuries, and save \$2.53 billion in crash costs annually. Recognizing these benefits, Congress created an incentive program in Section 406 of its 2005 highway program authorization to encourage states to enact and enforce primary safety belt laws, using grants as an additional incentive to pass the life-saving laws.

“If we’re serious about reducing deaths and injuries on our roads, then we must pass comprehensive primary seat belt laws in the states that lack them,” said Robert L. Darbelnet, president and CEO of AAA. “There’s a bottom line benefit for states, too, through millions in federal incentive dollars and reduced costs to state and local government.”

Primary enforcement laws enable law enforcement officers to stop a motorist whenever a violation is observed. Secondary enforcement laws require the officer to observe another traffic violation before stopping and citing a motorist for not buckling up. Eighteen of the 25 states that do not have primary safety belt laws covering all passenger vehicles are eligible to receive the incentive funds. The remaining seven states have already qualified for the funds by reaching required belt use rates.

“We know from previous studies that a majority of Americans support primary seat belt laws because they save lives and save states significant dollars in health care costs,” said Janet

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Froetscher, president and CEO of the National Safety Council. “State legislators need to know that when they support primary seat belt laws, a majority of voters will support them.”

Studies of states that changed their laws from secondary to primary enforcement have reported median 7 percent to 8 percent reductions in fatalities and an average 11 percentage point increase in safety belt use. Safety belts reduce the chance of being fatally injured in a traffic crash by 45 percent or more, depending on the type of crash and the types of vehicles involved.

“The quickest and least expensive way for a state to reduce highway fatalities immediately is by enacting a primary belt law,” said Phil Brady, president of the National Automobile Dealers Association. “We urge states without primary belt laws to reexamine this issue.”

The following Section 406 incentive grant amounts are available to states enacting and enforcing primary enforcement safety belt laws meeting criteria established by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

Arizona: \$12,194,224; Arkansas: \$9,497,497; Colorado: \$12,015,277; Florida: \$35,502,008; Idaho: \$4,543,081; Kansas: \$11,184,630; Massachusetts: \$13,596,153; Missouri: \$16,203,001; Montana: \$4,854,709; Nebraska: \$7,437,184; New Hampshire: \$3,725,188; North Dakota: \$5,138,213; Ohio: \$26,757,615; Rhode Island: \$3,725,188; South Dakota: \$5,213,510; Virginia: \$16,574,441; Wisconsin: \$15,237,150; and Wyoming: \$3,725,188.

Note: Effectiveness data from National Cooperative Highway Research Program Report 601.

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