

Statement of

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

It is a pleasure to appear before you today and present the Department of Transportation's views on S. 2606. This bill would direct the Secretary of Transportation to establish a National Center for Statistical Analysis of Highway Operations within the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The Center would be responsible for acquiring, storing, retrieving and analyzing highway accident data, in addition to standardizing the information and procedures for reporting accidents on a nationwide basis.

S. 2606 is an outgrowth of the feasibility study for such a center which the Secretary was directed to conduct under the Highway Safety Act of 1973. In requiring this study, the Congress recognized the need to develop a national highway accident data base which would be an effective support for present and future highway safety



program efforts on the Federal, State and local levels.

I am in strong agreement with Congress's judgment about the value of obtaining better data. Effective implementation of the Nation's motor vehicle and highway safety programs requires comprehensive, up-to-date, and accurate information indicating the causes of accidents, resulting injuries and fatalities, and the impact of measures taken to reduce their occurrence. We need early identification of trends so that we can take appropriate steps before problems assume critical levels. This type of information is necessary for the development of individualized remedies and programs for reducing accidents and mitigating their effects.

Data obtained from a representative nationwide sample of accidents will aid our efforts to develop appropriate Highway Safety Program Standards and Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards and any amendments needed to refine those standards. Such data, moreover, is crucial to the development of a strong administrative record that will enable our standards to withstand judicial scrutiny. For this reason, our rulemaking activity is one of the critical determinants of our data needs.

Increased highway and vehicle safety data generation and collection will be necessary to carry out Secretary Coleman's policies for improving the analysis and review of



regulations issued by the Department. Our analyses of the increased data will enable us to keep our existing regulations effective. It will also ensure that new regulations and programs are sound and do not impose unnecessary burdens on the private sector, on consumers, or on Federal, State, and local governments.

In its February 14, 1975, report to the Congress, the Department concluded that a national center is feasible, and provided considerable information concerning how such a center could be made operational. However, in view of redirection of effort by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration toward the establishment of a national accident data system, the Department recommended that the Congress await the outcome of that effort before authorizing the creation of a national center.

During the past several years, the NHTSA has made considerable progress in providing a more effective highway safety data base. This progress is highlighted by a reorientation of program emphasis, increased resources, and our development of three major statistical data bases: the Fatal Accident Reporting System; the Pedestrian-Bicyclist Accident Data Sampling and Analysis Program; and the National Accident Sampling System. The last two data bases represent a reorientation of program emphasis, from a primarily

clinical or case-by-case approach to a statistical approach based upon probability samples of a national population of accidents. Linking this statistical approach with detailed information about accidents facilitates the development of more accurate data, predictions, and evaluations in a more timely and cost effective manner.

At the heart of the NHTSA data programs will be the National Accident Sampling System (NASS), the most recent and most comprehensive accident data project underway. NASS will provide representative and detailed data describing the magnitude and character of the national accident picture. The data base will include a certain level of detail on all accidents in the sample, from those involving property damage to those involving fatalities. Through analyses of the pre-crash, crash, and post-crash events, the program will relate accident severity to injury severity. A pilot program for the part of NASS which addresses this objective is embodied in the National Crash Severity Study (NCSS). The NCSS is currently being placed in operation and will continue for two years.

Field teams of trained investigators under contract will ensure that the data are of sufficient quality and content for tracking trends, identifying safety problems, and evaluating countermeasures. The system design for NASS has been approved by a national review panel and a comprehensive pilot test of the system is scheduled for fiscal

year 1977. Complete implementation of the system is expected by fiscal year 1980.

The Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS), which became operational in the Spring of this year, is a census of all fatal motor vehicle accidents occurring throughout the Nation. FARS, which replaced our previous Highway Fatality Statistics and Fatal Accident File, brings together information from police accident reports, driver licensing files, motor vehicle registration files, State and Federal highway department files, and medical records. It is particularly useful in helping to standardize and make more comprehensive our records in this area. Privacy of individuals is protected by converting the data at an early stage to prevent identification of individuals.

The third major data base is the Pedestrian-Bicyclist Accident Data Sampling and Analysis Program (PADSAP). Data on pedestrian and bicycle accidents are collected via supplemental reports used by sampled police agencies throughout the country. PADSAP has gone through the initial phase of system design. Its pilot test, the second phase of the program, is nearing completion.

Other current data collection and analysis efforts include Multidisciplinary Accident Investigations (MDAI), which use sophisticated investigation techniques and computer-aided reconstruction to achieve the most in-depth investigation of "high interest" crashes. Serious school bus crashes and

catastrophic crashes are often investigated in this manner. MDAI are also used to investigate air bag deployments and other special systems.

In addition to data collection, the NHTSA also has the responsibility to provide statistical, and informational services to the general public and interested parties. A NHTSA Fact Book providing comprehensive current highway accident information for management personnel, statisticians, analysts, and engineers has been published and plans for its annual revision and publication have been made. The NHTSA also responds to inquiries covering the broad range of data and information available on highway safety, vehicle safety, and accident research. In 1973, for example, 563 requests for information were processed, 365 of which were governmental requests and 198 were from the private sector.

I might note, here, that the number of informational requests processed has continued to increase. In 1975, 744 requests were received, 485 of which were from government agencies and their contractors and 259 from the private sector. Projections for 1976 indicate such requests will continue to increase.

Our efforts to establish the various national data systems are being supplemented by our work with the States under the Highway Safety Act in collecting, standardizing,

and analyzing highway safety information. Under section 402 of that Act, the NHTSA promulgated two standards which have promoted the standardization of information and procedures for reporting highway accidents. Highway Safety Program Standard No. 10, "Traffic Records," specifies certain minimal data on drivers, vehicles and highways and on traffic accidents for use in highway safety analyses and evaluations. Highway Safety Program Standard No. 18, "Accident Investigation and Reporting," defines a uniform, comprehensive motor vehicle traffic accident investigation program for gathering information, standardizing definitions, classifications, and a format for data input into statewide traffic records systems.

From the description of these data collection and dissemination programs, it should be clear that the NHTSA is working toward fulfilling the major recommendations of the feasibility study and the major proposals of S. 2606. In summary, the NHTSA is amplifying existing data bases and developing new ones as experience and need dictate; (e.g., FARS); making major use of statistical sampling methods (e.g., NASS); standardizing information and procedures for accident investigations (e.g., Highway Safety Standards 10 and 18); and providing various information to the highway safety community. Both budget and staff have been increased in the last year by the Department in support of this vital

effort. The funding is now at a level approximating that suggested in the feasibility study for the initial operation of a national center.

While the Department sees great merit in establishing a national data center within the NHTSA, we do not believe that legislation is necessary to accomplish this purpose. As you have probably surmised during my discussion, the Department already has sufficient statutory authority to carry out all the data collection and statistical analysis functions of such a center. The Department of Transportation Act, Title 23 of the United States Code, and the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety give the Department far-reaching authority to collect, analyze, and distribute data, studies, and information concerning highway safety.

The Department intends to use its existing authority to establish a national data center in the NHTSA. The agency's existing statistical collection and analysis programs will serve as the nucleus for the center. From this base, the center will be developed in accordance with a carefully phased and flexible plan. As I have stated, the test stage of some of these programs has not yet been completed. Since we will be adjusting our plans to reflect the results of these developmental and testing efforts, our completion of the plan for the center will take some time.

I recognize the desire expressed in S.2606 for enhancing the accessibility of the State and local governments as well as the highway safety community to highway safety data. The data collected by the center will aid the State and Community highway safety programs and motor vehicle safety regulatory program. Some of the data, such as that in NASS, will be national data that will not give States a picture of their own particular problems. However, that data will serve as the core around which the States and localities can build supplementary data systems. As we move ahead with development of the center, we will continue our efforts to improve data collection and analysis at the State and local levels.

The creation of a national center within the NHTSA will require coordination between the NHTSA and the Federal Highway Administration. Although the center will serve some of the FHWA's data needs, it will not meet the need for assisting the States in identifying and correcting highway hazards at specific locations. Under a joint State/FHWA program, the States collect and analyze highway-related data to identify high accident or potentially hazardous locations as well as other unique requirements at the State and local levels, and to design effective countermeasures. This program, which is specifically directed at on-site problem identification and correction,

is primarily a State responsibility. FHWA will continue to conduct this program.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared testimony. My colleagues and I will be happy to respond to any questions that you or the members of the Subcommittee may have.