

STATEMENT OF DIANE K. STEED, ADMINISTRATOR, NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE SURFACE TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION, CONCERNING HIGHWAY SAFETY, FEBRUARY 22, 1984.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning on the highway safety program. The program is at an exciting point in its history, and I very much want to share with you some of its current developments. With me at the witness table is George Reagle, Associate Administrator for Traffic Safety Programs.

The good news is that in 1983 the nation experienced the smallest number of highway fatalities in 20 years. Our latest calculations show that 42,500 persons died on the highways, more than a thousand fewer than in 1982, and twelve thousand fewer than in the peak year of 1972. The death rate for miles traveled stands at an all-time low of 2.6 per hundred million vehicle miles.

I find it especially significant that this decline occurred during a year of economic recovery, a time when the increase in vehicle miles traveled would be expected to increase the number of accidents. It shows that safety programs are having an effect. By concerted effort, we can reduce the tragedy of painful injury and death on the highways.

This morning I want to stress two programs that are playing a key role in this effort: alcohol countermeasures and child safety seats.

Alcohol Countermeasures

The New Years holiday for 1983-1984 was the safest in 35 years, a symbol of the growing public awareness of the dangers of drinking and driving. This is cause for celebration -- but not for complacency. The experience of other nations shows all too clearly that initial successes do not produce long-term gains without continued effort. We are therefore working hard to improve and expand the programs.

Of vital importance to this effort is the section 408 program for alcohol incentive grants. We approved grants to 11 States in 1983. Within the next week we will be announcing two more grants. This means that 26 percent of the States have met the criteria within the first year of the program. From what we know of current State plans, we expect to make several additional grants by year's end. By committing themselves to the comprehensive alcohol program that section 408 demands, the States are showing the resolve that makes for effective programs. Several have already experienced dramatic reductions in alcohol-related crashes. For example, Delaware, the second State to qualify for a grant, experienced a 30 percent reduction in alcohol related fatalities in 1983 compared to 1982.

The Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving recommended that the States increase the drinking age to 21 as the most effective single step to reduce drunk driving fatalities. Although we disagree with the Commission's recommendation that the States' highway funds should be affected, we agree that the age should be set at 21 and we are actively encouraging the States to do so. The Congress has already directed us to take leadership in this area by making the 21 drinking age the first supplementary criterion under section 408. We believe that it is particularly important to eliminate State-to-State variations in drinking age that tend to encourage bar-hopping across State lines.

Although we believe the trend to 21 is well established among the states -- Nebraska just became the 20th State to enact a law barring all sales to persons under 21 -- there is much more that can be done to encourage responsible behavior among young drivers. We have begun to work with target groups, such as graduating seniors, who are prone to mix drinking and driving. In March we are sponsoring a national conference in Springfield, Illinois, for "Project Graduation", an effort to translate the successful efforts of States such as Maine (which had no graduation fatalities in 1983) into a nationwide program. We have learned a lot about what makes programs work and we are moving quickly to share what we've learned, both through the conference and through joint efforts with the National Institute for Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse and the Department of Health and

quickly to share what we've learned, both through the conference and through joint efforts with the National Institute for Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse and the Department of Health and Human Services.

Child Safety Seats

The last three years have seen a remarkable wave of interest in laws that require small children riding in cars to be in child safety seats. At the beginning of 1981, only Rhode Island had followed Tennessee's pioneering effort. By the end of 1983, 39 more States and the District of Columbia had enacted similar laws. Vermont has just become the 42nd State, and others may enact laws during the current session. This happened because the legislatures understood the need to protect children, not because they had a Federal mandate or because they feared the loss of highway funds. It is our firm view that such programs succeed to the extent that the States and communities have a personal stake in the outcome.

The results of the laws have been encouraging. The percentage of children in safety seats has more than doubled, from 15 per cent to 40 per cent. The States with the highest rates are showing significant reductions in the numbers of children injured and killed in accidents, as much as 25 to 33 percent in some States. This is good news. But we have a long way to go before we can say

that enough has been done. The rates remain low in many States, even after enactment of the laws. Much needs to be done to insure that the seats are used, and used properly.

We are urging the States to follow the example of successful programs such as those in California, Maryland, and Ohio. From our review of these programs, we have a good idea about what works. A program should be statewide in scope, with an effective and visible enforcement effort. It should have a central coordinator, and stress education through hospitals, pediatricians, pre-schools, and service clubs. It should encourage loaner and rental programs to help parents with lower incomes. It should place heavy emphasis on informing the public and law enforcement personnel about the benefits of seats. And it should be able to obtain data to evaluate and improve its performance.

Many States are incorporating child restraint programs into their 402 programs. The percentage of 402 funds now being devoted to restraint programs is in the neighborhood of 8 percent, split between child restraint programs and general safety belt programs. The bill now before the committee, H.R.4616, would direct that each State commit 8 per cent of its 402 funds to child restraint programs, in addition to the 2 per cent now earmarked for safety belt programs. The bill would limit this earmarking to a two year period. Although we do not support the increased authorization levels for the 402 program in the bill, we do believe that States should spend an appropriate percentage

of 402 funds on child restraint programs. We are uncertain, however, whether this shift in State priorities is best achieved through a percentage earmarking or through stronger encouragement from NHTSA to address this area. It may be the case that the latter method allows more flexibility in funding this safety priority to take into account differing State safety needs. In any event, we would strongly urge that any percentage earmarking be limited to two years and that the States be encouraged to fund the programs from other sources after the start-up period.

Other Programs

Alcohol and child restraint programs are at the top of our highway safety agenda, but there is much to report on other subjects.

Section 209

You have asked about the status of the media demonstration projects under section 209 of the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1978. We have already begun one of the projects under section 209 and have completed work on our requests for proposals on four of the five remaining projects. We have just published the initial notice of these projects in the Commerce Business Daily. We will issue the requests for

proposals within 60 days, and expect to award contracts for the projects by early fall. This keeps us on schedule to complete these projects within the required time.

Computerized Traffic Records

You have also asked us for information on computerized traffic records. We have continued to keep traffic records high on our list of program priorities. The bare fact is that the States can't plan their safety programs unless they know what's happening on their highways. Several States have made great progress in their information systems. In Pennsylvania, the new Criminal Records Information Network has given judges quick access to information about the driving records of persons brought before them on drunk driving charges. In Michigan, the Michigan Accident Location Information (MALI) program enables the State to readily identify its high accident locations. The locations identified through MALI have been targeted by very successful accident reduction efforts. In Alabama, we are completing a contract to develop a model traffic records system that links the State's principal data subfiles into a single system, so that the information can be quickly located, evaluated and updated. We're working hard to spread the news about these and other successful systems to other jurisdictions.

Relationships

In concluding my statement, I want to say that one key ingredient of an effective highway safety program across the country is the degree of cooperation among those who work in the program. I have never seen the relationships among Federal, State, and local governments and the nongovernmental safety community better than they are today. There is high interest and commitment everywhere, and we are doing everything in our power to maintain this enthusiasm.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.