

STATEMENT OF DIANE K. STEED
BEFORE THE ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG ABUSE SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES.

June 19, 1984

Madam Chairman and members of the Committee, I am pleased to accept your invitation to testify about measures to combat drunk driving. With me at the table is George Reagle, our Associate Administrator for Traffic Safety Programs.

Although we have not appeared before your Subcommittee, we are very familiar with the work being carried out under your jurisdiction. We are pleased to be allied with agencies such as the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) in the national effort to mitigate the effects of alcohol and drugs on our society. Our ties to NIAAA are reinforced through an interagency agreement we signed last year. Most recently, we worked closely with NIAAA in the successful Lifesavers Conference in Orlando this spring.

Our agency's special role is to deal with the dreadful consequences of alcohol and drugs on the highway. In 1983, more than 22,500 people lost their lives in alcohol-related crashes. Thousands of these were young people. In their immediate and devastating effects, alcohol-related crashes represent the most tragic and senseless threat to public health in America.

Motor vehicle crashes, especially those involving alcohol, are the leading cause of death among teenagers. Persons 18-20 are more than twice as likely as the average driver to be involved in an alcohol-related crash. While teenagers represent only 7 percent of licensed drivers they account for 15 percent of all alcohol involved crashes. We find that almost 60 percent of the fatally injured drivers under 20 years of age have been drinking before the crashes that kill them. But, fortunately, there is something we can do to stop this senseless slaughter. We can raise the drinking age in all States to 21.

Last Wednesday at a "Save Our Students Coalition" rally on the Capitol steps, Secretary Dole announced the Administration's support for a federal requirement that would withhold five percent of a State's highway fund allocation in FY 1987 and ten percent in FY 1988 if it has not enacted a 21-year drinking age. States would receive the funds withheld as soon as they enacted an age 21 provision. This sanction sends an effective message: Americans will no longer tolerate drunk driving.

We know that raising the drinking age to 21 works. New Jersey, for example, raised its drinking age to 21 in 1983 and experienced a 26 percent reduction in nighttime fatal accidents among 19-20 year-olds that year. In all, 23 States now have age 21 laws. Since last fall, four States have raised their drinking ages to 21. But momentum appears to have stalled. Efforts to raise the drinking age to 21 failed in 19 States this year alone.

The resulting checkerboard of minimum drinking ages which differ from State to State may be creating "blood borders", where young people drive across State lines to drink. In order to protect all Americans, we must increase the drinking age to 21 in all States. We must all work together to win the battle.

While raising the drinking age is critical, that alone is not enough. A broad-gauged effort is required. Of vital importance to this effort is the alcohol safety incentive grant program enacted in 1982 as section 408 of title 23, United States Code. We have approved grants to 15 States. Several of these States have already experienced dramatic reductions in alcohol-related crashes. For example, North Dakota, the first State to qualify for a grant, experienced a 54 percent reduction in alcohol-related fatalities in the first six months of 1984 compared to the same period in 1983. Delaware, the second State to qualify, reduced its alcohol-related deaths by 8% and injuries by 26% in 1983 compared to 1982.

We have seen a tremendous consciousness-raising across America. This must be followed with action by local communities and individuals to rid our neighborhoods of the drunk driving menace. Our society will have to alter deep-seated social patterns. We must change the societal attitude toward drinking and driving. This will not happen easily, or quickly, but with the coordinated efforts of individuals and groups at all levels it will happen. We must persuade drivers that the risks of arrest for driving under the influence is high and that sanctions will be sure and

swift. We must involve citizens throughout the community -- police officers, judges, alcohol treatment personnel, safety activists, press, teachers, and businesses.

More must also 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, the Department sponsored 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. From six States in 1983, the program grew to 35 States in 1984, with local efforts in hundreds of communities. S.A.D.D. chapters are springing up rapidly in schools across the country.

To enhance the effects of programs such as "Project Graduation", we have just begun a new public service campaign to combat drunk driving.

President Reagan kicked off the campaign on May 14 with a ceremony in the Rose Garden. The presence of Michael Jackson, who received an award from the President for contributing his music to the campaign, drew more national press coverage than any similar campaign has ever received. We believe that the "Drinking and Driving Can Kill a Friendship" campaign will be highly effective in capturing the attention of young people and helping to change their habits.

The combined effect of all our efforts has been and must continue to be a reduction in alcohol-related crashes. Our efforts are paying off. Alcohol-related deaths in 1983 were about 3,000 below the year before.

The percentage of alcohol involvement in fatal crashes fell from 58% in 1982 to 53% in 1983. The Memorial Day holiday for 1984 experienced 21 percent fewer fatalities than the year before. The 1984 New Year was the safest in 35 years. These safer holidays symbolize the growing public awareness of the dangers of drinking and driving.

This is cause for hope -- but not for complacency. I cannot emphasize strongly enough how much this beginning, and all future progress, depends on the joint efforts of everyone: citizens, citizen groups, private-sector organizations, and government at all levels. Enactment of a 21 drinking age in every State is a critical element in ensuring our continued progress.

We are now observing signs that the dangers of drinking and driving have been strongly impressed on the public consciousness. In a Harris poll last month about measures individuals can take to improve their health, the respondents listed the avoidance of drunk driving as their first priority. We have every hope that the interest and energy apparent in the response to our national campaign and among the groups represented in today's hearing will have an even greater effect in the future.

This concludes my statement. I will be glad to try to answer any questions you may have.