

STATEMENT OF DIANE K. STEED, ADMINISTRATOR,
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BEFORE THE TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE
ON APPROPRIATIONS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear this morning to testify on our occupant protection program. The funding for this program is of the greatest importance to us, and I am especially pleased that you have designated this first day of our budget hearing exclusively for occupant protection issues. Joining me today to discuss this important issue is Philip Haseltine, the Secretary's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy and International Affairs.

You have published Secretary Dole's plan for a national occupant protection program as an attachment to your hearing notice. I firmly believe that the activities outlined in that plan will enable us to nurture the growing interest in occupant protection systems so that the American public can receive the full benefits that such systems offer. That protection is available immediately, if people will only use it.

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The Secretary's plan describes the activities we intend to support with the first \$10 million of FY 1985 funds. We also have a plan for the expenditure of the second \$10 million of FY 1985 funds, since we continue to seek a full funding level of \$20 million per year for this program. We propose to follow the same pattern of funding throughout FY 1985 and FY 1986. Our FY 1986 budget justification identifies the sources of funding for the program and further describes the components of the program.

The program rests on these strongly held beliefs: that the use of occupant protection devices is the key to improvements in motor vehicle safety; that the level of safety belt use can be increased by coordinated educational efforts at the State and local level and by the States' enactment of safety belt use laws; and that the public must be educated about the passive restraints which will be increasingly available.

We have already made great progress in fostering the use of occupant protection devices. In the early 1980's, belt use hovered around 11 percent and seemed unresponsive to media efforts to increase it. But years of careful evaluation, and the dramatic successes of the child safety seat and drunk driving campaigns, have persuaded us that state and community-based programs, using local leaders and stressing local benefits, can substantially increase the voluntary usage of belts.

Experience with carefully structured local campaigns has been successful, as in Chapel Hill, N.C., where the usage rate climbed from 23 percent to 41 percent during the campaign, and in Jackson, Mississippi, where usage increased from 6 percent to 27 percent. Employer programs have also proved successful, with dramatic increases in belt use by employees in such companies as Lockheed, where usage increased from 32 percent to over 60 percent during the campaign. Within the Department of Transportation, before our education campaign, the figure was 28 percent. I am pleased to report that usage rates observed in a survey this month were found to be 73 percent, and after distribution of a reminder leaflet moved up to over 81 percent.

The program draws on this experience. Its purpose is to provide those people who shape public opinion on safety and health issues -- doctors, parents, employers, teachers and others -- with current factual information about safety belts and other forms of occupant protection, and to enlist their assistance in communicating this information to the public at large. The greatest part of the funding for the program will be used for educational activities at the state and community levels, pointing out the savings in lives and injuries to be expected in individual localities and states, and reinforcing the efforts of local groups to increase safety belt and child safety seat use.

To succeed, the program must encourage and coordinate the efforts of thousands of individuals, organizations, and communities. It must have this grass roots support if it is to bring about a meaningful increase in restraint usage. This was the lesson we learned from the drunk driving and child safety seat programs. For this reason, more than 60 percent of the total funds for the program would be directed to grass roots efforts.

To assist us in this effort, we anticipate funding initially four major national organizations with local chapters throughout the country -- the American Red Cross, the American Public Health Association, the National Association of Parent-Teacher Associations, and the USDA Homemaker Extension Service --to encourage belt use through their many contacts with the public. In addition, we will competitively select a contractor with strong skills in administration, planning, and coordination, to help us integrate the elements of the program so that the national effort will be responsive to the needs and opportunities within the states and communities.

Through our efforts thus far to increase safety belt use, we have begun to see the usage level move upwards. Our latest data show that belt use by drivers has now moved above 15 percent. But, at the same time, our experience shows that voluntary usage levels do not approach the levels

attainable through safety belt usage laws. By intensifying this effort, the program will result in continued increases in voluntary usage. At the same time, it will help lay the foundation for enactment of safety belt use laws. We are convinced that safety belt use laws are the most effective way to increase belt use and provide immediate improvements in occupant protection. In Great Britain, for example, usage rose from 40% to more than 90% after enactment of a safety belt usage law. Fatalities have declined about 25%. As I will discuss in more detail in a moment, New York State's new safety belt law is also showing dramatic early results. We are responding daily to requests from state legislators for information on safety belts and are participating in safety belt seminars and workshops attended by legislators. We expect that much of the effort we propose to devote to safety belt information and education at the local level will also be reflected in greater public support for belt use laws.

This increased support has already resulted in the enactment of safety belt use laws in three states: New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. A belt use bill has passed the Michigan legislature and will soon be signed by the Governor. The Secretary's program also seeks to assist these States to make their laws as effective as possible. During the 1985 legislative sessions, bills to require safety belt use have been introduced in more than 30 other States and are expected to be introduced in several others. Safety belt legislation also passed one

house in both the Maryland and Virginia legislatures, which should help lay the groundwork for renewed efforts in those states next year. The prospects in several other states are also favorable for serious consideration of belt use laws.

The momentum is clearly shifting in favor of enacting state belt use laws. As the clear life-saving results from the states become known, we expect that public support for belt use laws will increase even further. The plain fact is that safety belts save lives. In New York alone, millions of motorists are now buckling up, many for the first time. Thousands of persons will now be wearing belts when crashes occur, and many will be spared death or serious injury because of the belts. Through the occupant protection program, we will spread the news about these results to other states to facilitate their consideration of similar laws.

Preliminary data from New York after the belt use law went into full effect on January 1, 1985, indicates that sixty-six percent of motorists are buckling their belts, up from 17 percent in early October. Usage began increasing even before enforcement was initiated.

Immediately after the law was enacted, we began work with New York to provide implementation assistance including enforcement, training, usage surveys and public service announcements. The tremendous increase in safety belt use in New York over prior usage levels supports our belief

that safety belt use laws will produce the same life-saving benefit in America that they have provided in other countries. We intend to incorporate the New York experience into the occupant protection program for the guidance of other states.

We have been able to assist New York despite our current funding limitations, but even to respond to the requests for assistance that we have already received from other states would exceed our current capacity. To expand the effort to other states, so that they can experience the savings in lives that belts make possible, we need the funds that we are seeking in our request.

We would not limit our efforts to safety belts. At this time, we are developing a new generation of informational materials on passive restraints that we propose to distribute through the program. We intend that each educational effort on occupant restraints stress the benefits of passive restraints as well as those of manual safety belts. These materials will dispell the myths currently held by many people about air bags. For example, many people believe safety belt use is not necessary in cars equipped with air bags. That is not the case. Safety belts are needed to ensure that people are protected in all types of crashes. Some people are also worried that the inflation of the air bag will cause them to lose control of the car. That is also a myth. We will be encouraging owners of automotive fleets to purchase air bag equipped

cars, either as original equipment or as retrofit kits which are now available for the driver's side. Materials will also remind people to leave automatic belts connected, so that they will enjoy the benefits of automatic protection. The public needs to be fully informed about all available occupant restraint options.

Mr. Chairman, I could speak at length about the occupant protection program and about the savings in lives and injuries that it will bring. I believe it represents our best opportunity to effect a real and lasting change in the public's attitude toward protection of all types. I will conclude my prepared statement and will be pleased to try to answer any questions that you might have.