

STATEMENT OF DIANE K. STEED, ADMINISTRATOR,  
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BEFORE THE SURFACE TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION,  
ON THE FISCAL YEAR 1986 BUDGET

March 7, 1985

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear today to testify on the fiscal year 1986 budget of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. We are looking forward to continuing the progress in highway safety that has been made in recent years, and I am glad to have this opportunity to inform you of our plans for FY 1986.

Secretary Dole has given you a summary of the funding levels for highway safety programs in FY 1986. I want to stress that those levels are virtually unchanged from FY 1985 levels, thereby affirming our belief in the value of those programs. Their effectiveness is clear.

I can report that the fatality rate in 1984 declined to an all-time low of 2.55 deaths per hundred million vehicle miles travelled. In 1984, the combined effects of a variety of interrelated factors --alcohol programs, improved vehicles, higher levels of belt use, better roads --were almost enough to overcome the effects of a 4.5 percent surge in vehicle miles travelled during the year. Our final data are not yet in, but we estimate that 43,800 persons died in highway crashes during 1984,

an increase over the 42,600 who died in 1983, but well below the number who would have died if safety efforts had not moved ahead. This number shows progress, but it also shows how far we have to go.

Of all the activities in highway safety, alcohol safety and occupant protection remain at the top of my agency's agenda. In the area of alcohol, we are beginning to see evidence of a real decline in the incidence of alcohol-related fatalities. For 1980, our data indicated that about 50 percent of fatally injured drivers were legally intoxicated. Our data for the first 9 months of 1984 suggest that the percentage of intoxicated drivers in fatal accidents has declined to 45 percent.

In the area of occupant restraints, the upward movement in belt use now seems to be well established. Our roadside observations indicate that the use rate among drivers has climbed above 15 percent, an increase confirmed by our accident investigations. New York, with its belt use law which went into effect January 1, has experienced a dramatic increase in belt usage from 17 percent to an estimated 66 percent, based on preliminary data. We believe that these trends in alcohol involvement and belt use account for a part of the decline in the highway fatality rate. I believe that new developments in both areas will produce even more pronounced improvements during the coming year.

## ALCOHOL PROGRAMS

I will turn first to the alcohol safety program. During the last two sessions of Congress, this Committee reported two major bills which were enacted into law to deter drunk driving. The first, enacted in 1982, established the Section 408 alcohol safety incentive grant program. Under this program, 16 States have now qualified for a basic grant, and 13 of those States have also qualified for a supplemental grant. A number of other States have enacted legislation satisfying several of the grant criteria and are working to satisfy the remaining criteria. Several of the qualifying States have already shown remarkable progress. One of the most notable examples is North Dakota, which achieved a 44 percent reduction in alcohol-related fatalities during the 12 months ending June 30, 1984, compared to the preceding 12 months. We are working with the qualifying States to implement their programs and expect to see significant reductions in alcohol involvement as a result of these programs. For fiscal year 1986, we are seeking an obligation limitation of \$28.8 million for the Section 408 program. This represents our best estimate of the States' ability to implement programs in that year.

The second bill, enacted last summer, directs the Secretary of Transportation to withhold 5 percent of the fiscal year 1987 Federal-aid highway funds and 10 percent of fiscal year 1988 funds from any State that permits the purchase or public possession of alcohol by persons under the age of 21. After the law was enacted, Massachusetts raised its

minimum drinking age to 21. I am pleased to report that the Georgia and Virginia legislatures have passed age 21 drinking bills. Upon the Governors' signatures, these will become the 25th and 26th States to adopt 21 as the minimum drinking age. Age-21 bills have been introduced in 18 other States. Although the legislation was defeated in Wyoming, we are encouraged to see that age-21 bills have passed the Senates of Mississippi and Montana. We believe there is a good chance of passage in other States as well.

We have developed a notice of proposed rulemaking, which we hope to publish in the near future, to assist the States in drafting drinking age legislation. I believe that this guidance will facilitate the enactment of age-21 drinking laws in additional States. It will thereby help reduce the tragic loss of lives resulting from the involvement of young drivers in alcohol-related accidents, while also helping to assure the continued availability of Federal-aid highway funds to the States. Funding support for the development and implementation of age-21 drinking laws will be available both through the Section 408 program and through the basic Section 402 program. Alcohol safety programs will continue to draw a large share of the Section 402 funds, for which we are seeking an obligation limitation of \$126.5 million in FY 1986.

## SAFETY BELTS

After years of perseverance and hard work, safety advocates in the States are succeeding in passing laws to require the use of safety belts. I am very pleased to report that New Jersey, Illinois, and Michigan have now joined New York in enacting safety belt use laws.

During the 1985 legislative sessions, bills to require safety belt use have been introduced in more than 30 States and are expected to be considered 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 life-saving results from the States with laws 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.

As I noted earlier, preliminary data from New York after the belt use law went into full effect on January 1, 1985, suggests that about sixty-six percent of motorists are buckling their belts, up from 17 percent in early October. Usage began increasing even before enforcement began. We have worked intensively with New York in the development of their implementation plans to help gain public acceptance of the new law.

We are doing our utmost to ensure that information about the benefits of safety belts and of all types of occupant protection is available to a wide spectrum of individuals and organizations in each State. The evidence is clear that mandatory use laws can significantly increase belt use and save lives. We want to facilitate States' consideration of such laws, but, in a larger sense, our goal is to increase the understanding of the importance of occupant protection.

To enable our efforts to move ahead, we are seeking full funding for the \$20 million occupant protection program in fiscal years 1985 and 1986. We have developed a national occupant protection program for which these funds would be used. A major objective of this program is to lay a foundation which will result in the benefits of belt use and of other occupant protection systems being better understood by policy makers and the public. We have already made substantial progress. We have made presentations at governors' conferences, State and national conferences of legislators, before newspaper editorial boards throughout the country, on radio and television news programs and talk shows, and have

testified, when requested, before State legislatures. We are making available new and expanded materials and other forms of technical assistance to States and localities. We have responded to numerous requests for information from legislators and the public. All fifty States have been contacted and offered technical and other assistance.

As a final word on the subject of occupant protection, I want to assure you that we have not forgotten the vital role of child safety seats. In many respects, the movement that led to enactment of child safety seat laws was a model for the current trend toward safety belt use laws. Now that the laws have been passed, we will be working with the states to ensure that the Section 402 funding earmarked for child restraints will be put to work to implement the laws. The usage levels are not yet what they could be, and many seats are still used incorrectly. We are still short of the goal of protecting all children in motor vehicles, but we are making significant progress and expect to continue that effort.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. If you have questions about the program activities I have discussed or about other activities, I would be glad to answer them at this time.

