

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 1987 BUDGET

February 19, 1986

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear today to testify on the fiscal year 1987 budget of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). We are proud of the progress we have made in highway safety in recent years, and I am happy to meet with you today to discuss our plans for FY 1987.

I am pleased to report that preliminary 1985 data indicate that the fatality rate has declined to an all-time low of 2.50 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. We estimate that the number of persons who died in traffic crashes decreased from 44,241 in 1984 to about 44,000 in 1985, in the face of a steady increase in the number of vehicle miles traveled. Many more would surely have died if safety efforts had not been stressed throughout the Nation. The record of declining highway fatalities in five of the past six years is a record in which we can all take pride.

As shown by our budget request for FY 1987, we believe that the state and community highway safety program has contributed significantly to this achievement. The \$110 million requested by the President for the Section

402 program represents an increase in general-purpose funding for the program compared to FY 1986, after deducting the extra amounts provided in that year for child restraint programs and computerized traffic recordkeeping systems.

The preservation of the Section 402 program near current-year levels underscores our belief in the value of this program. We also believe the effectiveness of available funds should be further enhanced by eliminating the earmarking of funds for special purposes. Each state should have the flexibility to devote its 402 funds to the areas of greatest need. The FY 1987 budget reflects, in particular, the continuing emphasis the states are giving to alcohol safety and to programs directed toward increased safety belt and child restraint usage.

In the area of alcohol safety, we are seeing a promising trend which indicates that the combined efforts of federal, state and local governments, and the private sector on the drunk driving problem are paying off. In an October 1985 study, we found that the number of fatally-injured drivers who were intoxicated dropped from more than 14,000 in 1980 to 11,000 in 1984, a decline of 24 percent. The percentage of fatally-injured drivers who were intoxicated also declined from 50 percent to 43 percent over that same period, a 14 percent decrease. This decrease can be attributed to the effects of several

factors working together: greater public awareness of the problem, tougher state laws, stricter enforcement and sentencing, a decline in the population of young drivers, and an increase in the minimum drinking age in many states.

New developments which I will describe below in alcohol programs and safety belt programs offer the promise of further improvements during the coming year.

ALCOHOL PROGRAMS

The effort to reduce drunk driving continues to move ahead on several fronts. The legislation adopted by Congress in 1984 to encourage states to raise the legal drinking age to 21 has generated new interest and action to reduce drinking by young drivers. I am pleased to report that since the legislation was enacted, 15 states have enacted age-21 laws. Currently, 38 states have age-21 laws and approximately six more are expected to have them in 1986. Our studies indicate that the age-21 laws reduce the fatal accident involvement of the affected age group by approximately 13 per cent.

We proposed a regulation in September 1985 to offer guidance to the states and to establish a schedule for reviewing age-21 laws. A final

rule is currently being drafted. Funding support for the implementation of age-21 drinking programs will be available to the states through the basic Section 402 program. Alcohol safety programs will continue to draw a large share of the Section 402 funds in FY 1987.

Fourteen states have qualified since FY 1984 for basic and supplemental grants under Section 408, the alcohol safety incentive program established by Congress in 1982. Three additional states have qualified for basic grants. Based on our discussions with the states that have yet to qualify, we believe as many as six to eight may qualify for the basic grant and three may qualify for the basic and supplemental grants during FY 1986.

Stricter state anti-drunk driving laws have shown impressive results in reducing fatal crashes that are alcohol related. The 408 program has been instrumental in encouraging these tougher laws. North Dakota, the first state to qualify and receive funds, reports that during the ten years between 1973 and 1982 prior to Section 408, 63 percent of all fatal crashes were alcohol-related. In 1984 (January - October), only 41 percent were alcohol-related. New Jersey reduced drunk driving fatalities from 376 in 1981 to 213 in 1984, a 43.4 per cent decrease. Indiana, another 408 state, has reduced alcohol-related fatalities by 30 per cent.

We are requesting an obligational limitation of \$17.9 million for Section 408 in FY 1987, an amount which we believe is sufficient to provide

grants to all qualifying states in that year. We believe that the initial authorization for the program will be adequate to cover foreseeable obligations without the need for additional authorizations.

SAFETY BELT PROGRAMS

There is considerable momentum throughout the Nation in favor of mandatory belt use laws. Since Secretary Dole's July 1984 occupant protection decision, 16 states and the District of Columbia have followed New York's lead in enacting mandatory use laws. We expect this number to increase in 1986. The initial reports on the effectiveness of these laws are heartening. In states with mandatory use laws, usage has jumped from the range of 15 per cent to 40 per cent and above, with some states reporting initial use rates above 60 per cent, not unlike the experience of many foreign countries.

Research and experience in this country and abroad indicates that to be successful, efforts to increase usage of safety belts and child safety seats must have a number of different programs operating simultaneously. Education, incentives, enforcement, and media reinforcement operate best at the community level with broad participation from many sectors. Our occupant protection program has been designed to assist states and communities to achieve these kinds of multi-dimensional programs. For FY

1987, \$6.25 million of NHTSA's Section 403 funds are allocated to this program. This includes funds for the outreach activities and research. In addition, the states use Section 402 highway safety grant funds for occupant protection programs.

We are putting forth our best efforts to ensure that information about the benefits of safety belts and of all types of occupant protection is made available. For example, 10 of the 17 states that now have belt use laws received program implementation funds from NHTSA in 1985 to assist with education and evaluation. We expect to make more funds available for this purpose in 1986. A technical assistance program to help the states with implementing and evaluating their programs has been developed. National organizations (principally health, education, and medical) are sponsoring, with NHTSA's technical and financial support, nearly 400 state and local projects to stimulate community-based programs.

NATIONAL DRIVER REGISTER

Finally, I would like to provide you with a brief status report on our efforts to improve the National Driver Register (NDR), the program that identifies drivers whose licenses have been suspended or revoked as a result of serious driving violations. The program to improve the NDR, which was mandated by Congress in 1982, requires that the NDR's current batch processing system be converted to an interactive, electronic

telecommunications system and that the system's substantive data be moved to the states of record. Thus, the NDR will become an index that "points" to the states which hold data, and the NDR will no longer maintain substantive data.

The law requires us to pilot-test and evaluate the new system before we fully implement it. This April we expect to finish the process of selecting four states to take part in a pilot test of the on-line electronic "switchboard," called the Problem Driver Pointer System. The operational start-up for this on-line system is scheduled for mid-1987, and the results of the pilot-testing will be evaluated and reported to Congress during 1988. The final rule establishing the procedures NHTSA will follow for the transition from the current system to the new electronic system was published in July 1985.

In the meanwhile, we have made a number of improvements in the current NDR to make it work more effectively. These improvements include:

- Implementation of an overnight service so that states can send inquiries to the NDR over normal telephone lines and receive replies the next day. Ten states are now using this service and 12 more are expected to be added by the summer of 1986; and
- Implementation of an on-line computer connection to the existing NDR file that will respond as fast as the planned

electronic pointer system, although the information provided is less extensive. This "rapid response" technology will be offered to all states beginning in mid-1986.

Since the bulk of the pilot program activity is planned to occur in FY 1986 and 1987, this period requires relatively high levels of funding. To enable our efforts to move ahead, we are seeking \$1,751,000 for the National Driver Register for FY 1987, a significant part of which will be devoted to the pilot program.

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 try to answer them.