

Final

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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON SURFACE TRANSPORTATION
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) views on H.R. 1719, the "High Risk Drivers Act of 1993." This is my first appearance before this Subcommittee, and I want you to know how much I look forward to working with this Subcommittee and the Congress on the serious issues that NHTSA faces. With me are Adele Derby, Associate Administrator for Regional Operations and Michael Brownlee, Associate Administrator for Traffic Safety Programs.

The Bill's substantive provisions include a policy section, which directs the Secretary to develop and implement programs promoting safe driving by high risk drivers, and three titles.

Title I ("Young Driver Programs") of the Bill would establish a five-year (FYs 94-98), \$100 million incentive grant program, funded by the General Fund, for States that implement measures to combat major causes of young driver crashes. A State would become eligible for a basic grant (limited to 30 percent of its highway safety grant under 23 U.S.C. 402 for FY 89) each

year of the program if it: (1) has a graduated licensing system for drivers under age 18, meeting specified criteria; and (2) meets a specific number of eight additional criteria for each of the program's five years.

The graduated licensing program must have three stages: (1) an "instructional license," valid for a period decided by the Secretary, during which the licensee is prohibited from driving unless accompanied by a person who has a "full driver's license"; (2) a "provisional driver's license," issued after the instructional licensee has passed a written examination on traffic safety and a road test; and (3) a "full driver's license," issued after the provisional licensee has held the provisional license for at least one year with no safety violations.

The additional requirements for basic grants include such criteria as a maximum 0.02 percent blood-alcohol content (BAC) for drivers under age 21; mandated safety belt use for front and rear seat passengers; and an open alcoholic container prohibition affecting the passenger area of a motor vehicle on a public highway. Once a State is eligible for a basic grant, it becomes eligible for one or more of eight supplemental grants for taking additional actions.

Title II ("Older Driver Programs") would earmark \$16.5 million of highway safety research and development funds, over 11 fiscal years (FYs 95-05), under Section 403 of title 23, U.S.C., for research on various issues related to older drivers. Of the Section 403 funds earmarked for carrying out this title, \$250,000 would be set aside for each of FYs 96-98 to evaluate at least one model State program on older drivers each of these years.

Title III ("High Risk Drivers") requires the Secretary to report to Congress on actions needed to improve State driver records and control systems, and whether several national information systems having to do with driver licensing should be more closely linked.

H.R. 1719 contains valuable provisions, including several endorsed and currently implemented by NHTSA. In particular, Title II's requirements for research on issues related to older drivers and Title III's study of actions needed to improve State traffic records are consistent with NHTSA's current initiatives in both areas. We strongly support the activities and research included in both of these titles.

We also strongly support graduated licensing systems. NHTSA and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) have recommended these systems for many years as a

framework to motivate and teach students essential safe driving skills and behaviors.

Our main concern about the Bill centers on Title I's creation of a \$100-million grant program. In times of shrinking budgets and increased competition among Federal programs for limited funds, we believe it is necessary to determine first whether a proven, existing program can address a problem or set of problems before considering the enactment of new legislation. Since NHTSA is addressing a major portion of Title I's provisions under our State and community highway safety grant program (the "Section 402" program, 23 U.S.C. 402) and is evaluating and demonstrating licensing and other youth programs under our highway safety research and development program (the "Section 403" highway safety research and development program, 23 U.S.C. 403), we recommend that further action on this Bill be deferred.

NHTSA currently administers four grant programs that affect youth traffic safety: the Section 402 program, which covers a broad range of activities (cited above), two incentive grant programs for States that adopt specific programs to combat drunk and drugged driving (23 U.S.C. 408 and 410), and an incentive grant program for States that adopt both safety belt and motorcycle helmet use laws (23 U.S.C. 153).

In FY 93, these four programs provided the States with about \$161 million, \$115 million of which was provided through the Section 402 grant program. Although \$15.6 million went to programs directed at the younger driver population, the remaining funds also involve youth, since these programs affect the entire population. For FY 94, we estimate that the funds provided to the States for these four programs will be about \$8 million higher than the figures for FY 93, due to an increase by that amount to address alcohol-impaired driving among youth under the Section 402 program.

Funds provided under the Section 402 program serve as the Federal government's principal means to improve State programs in all areas of highway safety. These grant funds are apportioned annually under the program to each State, in accordance with a statutory formula. The funds support State planning to identify and quantify highway safety problems, provide start-up or "seed" money for new programs, and give direction to existing safety programs.

The Section 402 program has been especially successful in funding national and State priority areas, established through a rulemaking process that involves all members of the highway safety community. Although youth traffic safety is not separately identified as a national priority area, many activities within priority areas directly affect youth.

In the alcohol-impairment priority area, for example, the Section 402 program sponsors a broad array of programs aimed at underage drinking and driving, especially activities that support age-21 minimum drinking age laws. These programs, particularly the age-21 laws, are widely recognized for contributing to significant decreases in youth-involved traffic fatalities.

Underage drinking and driving, the single biggest problem in youth traffic safety, has decreased steadily over the past several years. From 1987 to 1992, the Nation experienced a 17-percent decline in the involvement rate of underage drunk drivers involved in fatal crashes. In 1987, our data show that 2,113 of 10,193 drivers aged 15-20 involved in fatal crashes (20.7 percent) had a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.1 percent or greater. Preliminary estimates for 1993 show 1,226 of 7,486 of the same group (16.4 percent) had a BAC of 0.1 percent or greater.

Despite the progress in underage drinking and driving, much more needs to be done in this and other areas of youth traffic safety. For many years, motor vehicle crashes have been the leading cause of death among teenagers. Preliminary estimates for 1993 show 5,942 of the nation's 39,850 traffic deaths (14.9 percent) were youth aged 15-20, of which 3,283 were drivers.

To enhance State efforts and further minimize underage drinking and driving, the Congress increased the funds for NHTSA's Section 402 program this fiscal year by \$8 million over FY 93's \$115-million level. Both the House and Senate appropriations report language for FY 94 expressly directed that all of this \$8 million be targeted by the States to augment their efforts in this area.

The Section 402 program also can be used to fund graduated licensing systems for drivers under age 18. Although few States have these systems, we expect more States will establish them as data becomes available on which of their many components are most effective in reducing crashes. During FY 94, we are evaluating components of graduated licensing systems to show their effectiveness in reducing crashes and determine the best way to implement them.

Our FY 94 Appropriations Act also provided \$500,000 for the agency's older driver research in FY 94. The House Appropriations Committee stated that these funds are intended to sustain NHTSA's older driver research program, set forth in two reports NHTSA submitted to Congress last year: "Traffic Safety Plan for Older Persons" and "Addressing the Safety Issues Related to Younger and Older Drivers." Younger and older driver safety clearly are matters of special concern to

NHTSA, and we are aggressively implementing the research agenda in these areas that we transmitted to Congress in 1993.

Our FY 95 budget request includes a total of \$739,000 to conduct younger and older driver research. During FY 95, we will conclude our two-year study on what researchers in other health fields have learned about the risk-taking behavior of young people and how this information may be applied in youth traffic safety.

In addition, NHTSA (in consultation with the Federal Highway Administration) is now completing a draft driver education research agenda and plan of action for a strengthened research program in driver licensing and education for youth. This plan may propose the development of an improved novice driver education program that is an integral part of a graduated licensing system. This draft research agenda and plan of action will be transmitted to the Congress in final shortly.

Finally, I would note that Title I duplicates several existing criteria for grants under the Section 410 alcohol incentive grant program. Title I's supplemental criterion for readily distinguishable licenses for young drivers is covered by a Section 410 basic grant criterion requiring a State to have a minimum drinking age program including this provision. Also, two of Title I's criteria for basic grants duplicate existing

supplemental criteria under Section 410: a 0.02 percent BAC limit for persons under age 21, and an open container and anti-consumption law for alcoholic beverages.

This concludes my prepared remarks. My colleagues and I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.