

Statement of
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Hearing On

Fighting Drunk Driving: Lessons Learned in New Mexico

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Good morning Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this Committee; particularly in such a lovely and humidity-free city.

Impaired driving is one of the most serious traffic risks facing the Nation, killing more than 10,000 people every year. In fact, every day, approximately 30 people die in motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver. Put another way, in the United States, someone dies every 48 minutes due to an impaired driver.¹ The annual cost of alcohol-related crashes totals more than \$51 billion.² Addressing this challenging issue is one of our highest priorities.

I would like to commend the Committee, and you Mr. Chairman, for your leadership on this very important issue and on highway safety in general. Since the enactment of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) in 2005, the Nation has seen consistent reductions in highway fatalities and injuries and the work of this Committee has been a major contributor to this progress. While we are pleased that the safety impacts are positive, I know we share the view with the Committee that much more needs to be done to reduce the suffering and economic cost of highway crashes and particularly the criminal behavior of driving while impaired (DWI).

¹ CDC, Injury Prevention and Control. Impaired driving.
www.cdc.gov/MotorVehicleSafety/Impaired_Driving/impaired-driv_factsheet.html.

² Blincoe L, Seay A, Zaloshnja E, Miller T, Romano E, Luchter S, et al. The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2000. Washington (DC): USDOT, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA); 2002.

The impaired-driving problem is complex and requires a full range of countermeasures. Research has shown that effective measures include:

- High Visibility Enforcement (HVE);
- training for law enforcement personnel;
- enhanced prosecution and adjudication; and
- zero tolerance for underage drinking.

We also put a special emphasis on reaching high-risk populations, such as high BAC (blood alcohol concentration) or repeat offenders. We continuously re-assess our approach and remain focused on finding even more effective and efficient means for fighting impaired driving. We also work with State, local and industry partners to develop and test new strategies and techniques.

Strengthening impaired driving laws and improving enforcement and adjudication of these laws are key strategies in efforts to reduce impaired driving. The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) supports strong laws for high BAC offenders and for drivers who try to circumvent the law by refusing to submit to a BAC test.

Ignition interlocks are another critical component of a comprehensive impaired driving program. A summary of 10 evaluations of interlock programs in the United States and Canada indicated that interlocks cut DWI recidivism by at least 50 percent, and sometimes more, compared to similar offenders without interlocks.³ Based on this strong evidence, USDOT recommends that ignition interlock programs be more widely implemented.⁴ I am pleased to point out that New Mexico has been a leader in ignition interlock program development and currently has one of the highest rates of interlock installations per capita in the nation.

Advanced technology could also play an integral element in reducing impaired driving. The Department is working to develop vehicle-based, alcohol detection technologies. Such technologies have the potential to prevent drunk drivers from operating vehicles, and if widely deployed, could be invaluable in our efforts to eliminate drunk driving. The goal is to develop non-invasive, seamless technologies that can accurately measure driver BAC and prevent a legally impaired driver from operating a motor vehicle.

The Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety, or DADSS for short, is being developed in partnership with the automotive industry, and has the potential to save a significant number of lives annually. It is estimated that nearly 8,000 lives could be saved by a system that could prevent driving by those who are over the legal limit for alcohol.⁵ You will hear more about this from other speakers today.

³ Elder R, Voas R, Beirness D, et al. Effectiveness of ignition interlocks for preventing alcohol-impaired driving and alcohol-related crashes. *Am J Prev Med* 2011;40(3):362–376.

⁴ CDC Community Guide: Impaired Driving: Research & Activities, <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/mvoi/AID/ignitioninterlocks.html>.

⁵ dadss Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety. <http://www.dadss.org/>. Accessed on 8/9/11.

But the most important component needed to reduce impaired driving is strong leadership and commitment at the highest levels of State and local government to enact strong and effective impaired driving laws, and implement multi-faceted prevention programs.

New Mexico is a model for the Nation in this regard. Our agency recognized this leadership and vision in 2004, when New Mexico applied for and won, through a competitive process, a \$3 million USDOT grant to develop and implement a comprehensive impaired driving program. Over the next five years, the State's Department of Transportation worked in concert with other State organizations to implement a number of innovative and effective strategies that have significantly reduced impaired driving in New Mexico. The model demonstrated by New Mexico allows states to identify deficiencies in their impaired driving program, develop methods to address those deficiencies, and gain support and resources to implement those methods. This model has proven so effective that we now encourage all states to adopt it.

In the coming weeks, USDOT will kick off its annual Impaired Driving National Crackdown, from August 19 through September 5. This campaign has helped to reduce impaired driving nationwide by 17 percent between 2004 and 2009. To keep the campaign fresh, we have developed a new look and feel this year, with a "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over" theme. New Mexico has been an active partner in this campaign, and we look forward to maintaining our partnership with the State on the national campaign and on collaboration on State initiatives.

The success of the New Mexico demonstration project has shown that by working together and using effective, evidence-based strategies, we can overcome this long-time problem, and ultimately save many more lives.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I would be glad to answer any questions you may have.