

# Testimony of Former NHTSA Administrator Nicole R. Nason

## Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety and Insurance

Chairman Pryor, Senator Toomey, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the reauthorization of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

As a former NHTSA Administrator and current national board member of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, I commend the Committee for including funding for advanced alcohol detection technology in the draft legislation. The Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety (DADSS) program is a result of a cooperative research agreement between NHTSA and the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety, which is composed of the world's

leading auto manufacturers. This work is critical, as 2009 fatality numbers make clear: 10,839 people were killed in drunk driving crashes. The technology to prevent drunk driving crashes already exists in an imperfect form, but with funding to perfect it, we can prevent nearly a third of all fatalities on our roads. Just last week, over twenty diverse organizations sent a letter to Congress in support of DADSS. I have included this letter with my testimony and ask that it be made a part of the hearing record.

There are numerous other important sections in the draft bill, including Section 109, requiring at least three DUI or seat belt high visibility enforcement campaigns annually. These campaigns are crucial to spreading the word that drunk drivers will be caught and prosecuted. The national Click It or Ticket campaign is one of the most successful highway safety programs of all time and serves as a model for other highway safety endeavors. Additionally, I commend the Committee for

including incentive grants for States to pass an all offender ignition interlock program. Since MADD began the Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving, 15 States have passed such laws.

As safety research dollars are so precious, I would also encourage the Committee to carefully consider how each section of the draft legislation may impact available safety resource funding. In a 2009 opinion piece in the Detroit News, I expressed concern about future funding for safety while automakers were pressed to develop advanced technologies for fuel economy. I noted, “[w]hen resources are constrained, something must give. Policymakers must understand these trade-offs and recognize the choices they might be compelling.” I believe this is still true. At a time when R&D funding is scarce, provisions that seem small could ultimately result in millions of dollars being diverted from larger safety needs in the areas of research or staffing.

Finally, a new staff-related proposal I hope the Committee will consider is the creation of a senior

NHTSA Ombudsman. After the Toyota hearings last year, it has become clear that many consumers feel frustrated with their inability to get a quick response from the NHTSA. As the former Administrator, I know the agency tries to respond to as many inquiries and complaints as possible, however, that process can take several weeks or longer. A senior Ombudsman role would both alleviate the pressure on the defects investigators to respond to numerous inquiries, and provide the public with a clear outlet for their requests. Many other Departments and agencies have an Ombudsman, and I believe NHTSA could benefit from having a person directly responsible for communicating with the public.

Thank you again for inviting me to appear today and I would be happy to answer any questions.