

Testimony of U.S. Senator Sherrod Brown
Oversight Hearing on Bus Safety
Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee
Subcommittee on Surface Transportation & Merchant Marine Infrastructure, Safety, & Security
March 30, 2011

Thank you, **Chairman Lautenberg, Ranking Member Thune,** and **members of the Committee.** I applaud you for holding this hearing on motorcoach safety today.

Thank you also to **Senator Hutchison** – for nearly four years we have worked together to pass our Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act into law to make motorcoaches safer for the millions of passengers who ride them every day.

Motorcoach accident fatalities in both our states highlighted the need for common-sense safety measures that protect both passengers and motorists.

These tragic, yet seemingly preventable fatalities have devastated families and communities, turning parents and friends into advocates and activists for safer vehicles and safer roads.

Two Ohioans are here today who can identify with the pain of losing a child in a motorcoach accident – and turning their grief into action.

I would like to thank and recognize **John and Joy Betts from Bryan, Ohio** who are in attendance today.

The Betts' lost their **son David**, a member of the Bluffton University baseball team, on March 2, 2007.

Bluffton University is a small college in Bluffton, Ohio, near I-75 in Allen and Hancock counties in the Northwest part of the state.

David's baseball team was on its way to Florida for spring training when their bus lost control on a poorly marked exit ramp outside Atlanta.

The bus toppled from an overpass.

Like the majority of fatal motorcoach accidents, when the bus rolled over, the passengers were ejected from their seats and thrown through the bus windows.

Along with David, six others were killed and dozens were injured.

The tragedy rocked a small town but also brought national attention to the need for long, overdue safety improvements to America's motorcoaches.

Since that day four years ago, the Bluffton families have been courageous and vocal advocates in raising awareness of motorcoach safety and demanding Congressional action.

The **National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) final report** from the Bluffton motorcoach accident – released almost three years ago – echoed recommendations the NTSB has been urging for years.

In the 110th, 111th, and now the 112th Congress, Senator Hutchison and I have introduced the **Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act**, which includes many of the NTSB's "Most Wanted" safety improvements.

Specifically, the Act would address many of the major safety shortfalls from the Bluffton accident, such as:

- Better protection systems for occupants including seatbelts, stronger windows, and an improved roof crush standard;

- Updated requirements for motorcoach drivers and motor carriers; and
- The need for on-board recorders with the capability to collect crash data.

Incredibly, many of these recommendations – including seatbelts, better motor-carrier oversight, and increased fire safety – have languished in legislative uncertainty for decades.

These safety measures are neither exotic nor complicated. They are not new, either. They are common-sense safety features that have been – and are – widely used across Europe and Australia.

But since they are not required by law, they have not been installed in most American motorcoaches.

Instead of saving lives, the public safety remains at risk.

As a father, it is disturbing to know that students are still traveling in motorcoaches without even the option of buckling up.

As a Senator, it is unacceptable that our laws – or lack of them – have made our vehicles and roads less safe for students, families, and anyone traveling our nation's roads.

This month has seen yet another rash of fatal motorcoach accidents—as heartbroken families and communities in New Jersey and New York know all too well.

Opponents of stricter motorcoach safety standards will tell you that this isn't a motorcoach problem; they would tell you that we have a problem with rogue bus companies and bad drivers.

Certainly, we must ensure drivers are fit to be behind the wheel and that bus carriers are playing by the rules—which our bill addresses.

But we simply cannot look the other way and reject the idea that improving the safety of our motorcoaches is unnecessary – or fiscally imprudent.

John Betts has said, *“It is necessary through our current regulations to get bad operators off the road. However it is not sufficient as it does nothing to ensure safety once the crash has occurred.”*

I couldn't agree more. We can get bad operators off the road. But it's not enough to ensure passenger safety in the tragic event of an accident.

If the technology to save lives and reduce injury in motorcoach accidents exists, we must put that technology to use.

As motorcoach travel increases – and it has as gas prices have risen and airline travel has become more expensive – we need these new safety standards to ensure the safety of every rider and driver on the road.

The number of serious accidents and tragic deaths will, sadly, only increase if we do not take action.

In the last three Congress's, Senator Hutchison and I have introduced the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act.

We do so because it's the right thing to do. And we do so because people like the Betts' have made it the easy thing to do.

Out of their grief, they have asked their government to step in and protect Americans families from the heartbreak they and the Bluffton community experienced.

They have asked their government to pass a law that can save lives and keep our roads more secure.

I look forward to future collaboration with the Committee and our colleagues in the Senate to pass this bill into law and to finally improve motorcoach safety in our nation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.