

Testimony of Colleen Sheehey-Church
National President, Mothers Against Drunk Driving
United States Senate
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Paving the Way for Self-Driving Vehicles
June 14, 2017

Chairman Thune, Ranking Member Nelson, and Members of the Committee,

On behalf of millions of drunk driving victims across the country, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Commerce Committee on the critical issue of self-driving cars. We were pleased to work with you and the committee on the FAST Act. You and the committee are to be commended for your leadership on highway safety.

Like so many others before me, I came to Mothers Against Drunk Driving after my 18-year-old son Dustin was killed by a drunk and drugged driver. Dustin was sober and wearing a seatbelt while riding in the back seat of a car. The vehicle crashed and flipped into the Connecticut River. Dustin couldn't escape and drowned. It was a senseless death and a 100 percent preventable crime.

Dustin's story is my story. But it represents thousands and thousands of stories of victims and survivors in every state in the country. I travel to those states and talk to those who suffer... and there is one thing that each of them wants... NO MORE VICTIMS.

In 1980, a bereaved mother who had lost a child to the needless crime of drunk driving decided enough was enough. Together with a group of other moms, she formed Mothers Against Drunk Driving to tell the country that drunk driving is not a joke, it is a crime. Together with thousands of other victims, the public and law makers heard our plea and as a result, laws and attitudes were changed.

Changing the Culture

We changed the culture. In 1980, 51,091 people were killed on America's roadways and over 20,000 people were killed each year due to drunk driving. Since then, MADD has worked to pass tough drunk driving laws in all 50 states and at the federal level. The 21 minimum drinking age, a national .08 BAC standard, zero tolerance laws for underage drivers, and ignition interlock laws are just a few of the things we have achieved together since 1980.

As a result, drunk driving deaths have been cut in half since our founding. That's what culture change and tough laws have achieved, but it's not nearly enough. Thirty-seven years after MADD taught the nation it is not acceptable to drink and drive, one third of all traffic deaths, over 10,000 people, are caused because of drunk drivers.

Total traffic deaths in 2015 were 35,092. This was an increase of 7.2 percent over 2014 and represented the largest increase in 50 years. Preliminary numbers for 2016 show another

substantial increase in traffic deaths.

This must serve as a wakeup call to the nation.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 94 percent of all traffic deaths occur because of human error. That means about 33,000 deaths occurred in 2015 due to the driver. Many if not all of these were preventable.

Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving

In 2006, MADD launched a new initiative called the Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving. Our goal is ambitious, to literally eliminate drunk driving in America so there are no more victims.

Our Campaign is based on four prongs: support for law enforcement, ignition interlocks for all convicted drunk drivers, development of advanced vehicle technologies, and grassroots support for these efforts.

The third initiative, advanced technology, is why I'm here today.

In 2008, NHTSA and the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety (ACTS) formed an ambitious program called the Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety, or DADSS. DADSS seeks to create a passive in-vehicle alcohol detection system which would prevent an impaired driver at .08 or higher from starting his or her vehicle. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has estimated that the DADSS technology could save 7,000 lives per year. We were pleased to work with you and the committee through MAP-21 and the FAST Act to authorize this technology. Progress has been steady and I would ask this committee to help expedite DADSS by encouraging program partners to have the technology ready for vehicle integration by the end of the FAST Act authorization in Fiscal Year 2020.

Autonomous Vehicles

Autonomous Vehicles represent the other technology that presents an enormous potential to eliminate drunk driving and other behavioral-related traffic deaths. MADD strongly supports this technology and hopes it will begin as soon and as safely as possible.

Let me be clear, MADD is not an expert on the intricacies of this technology, but we are absolutely a stakeholder. Technology will ultimately be the way we eliminate drunk driving autonomous vehicles are vital in helping us achieve our goal.

There are some key principles that MADD recommends as Congress and the administration address this issue:

Support federal regulatory framework. It doesn't make sense for states to pass laws or regulate the safety of autonomous vehicles. It is important that the playing field be level and states should leave the self-driving car safety issues to the automotive safety experts at the

federal level. To that end, it is critical that the Congress and/or the administration provide the necessary guidance and regulations to the autonomous vehicle community in order to allow a national roll-out of this technology. Emphasis must be placed on ensuring that the technology is safe, and that processes are followed to ensure that rigorous safety standards are followed, and that effective methods for educating the public on technologies are developed. We believe the DOT/NHTSA Autonomous Vehicle Policy issued last year is a good beginning for providing safety guidance to those companies developing Highly Automated Vehicles. MADD and others in the traffic safety community look forward to working with the Committee to help ensure that public safety is of the highest priority, that the development of the technology continues at a rapid pace, and that future public acceptance comes to fruition.

Support existing state regulatory system. The state role in autonomous vehicles is to continue doing what they do for conventional vehicles today. This includes titling, registration, insurance requirements, etc. States should not regulate the safety of autonomous vehicles because they do not have the technical expertise to do so and their involvement could hinder the technological progress in the deployment of this life-saving technology.

Support for level four and five autonomous technologies. For MADD's purposes, it is important that vehicles achieve level four and level five automation (i.e., vehicles that do not require a human driver in at least certain environments or under certain conditions). Drunk driving is arguably the biggest killer on our roadways. Alcohol and drug impairment have lasting effects, so it is imperative for maximum safety that the car be able to completely take control and remove the driver from driving.

Support for evaluating the technology as it evolves. The Autonomous Vehicle Policy includes provisions for recording and sharing information on system capabilities and data on events, incidents, and crashes. These data can be used to enhance the safety benefits of the technology and should be standardized, anonymous, absent of propriety information, and made available not only to the federal government but also to states, researchers, and the public.

Closing

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee. In the last two years, traffic deaths have seen the largest increases in 50 years. This should alarm us all. While great progress has been made in reducing traffic deaths, over 35,000 people died in 2015. This is unacceptable. The promise of safe, self-driving cars is very exciting, particularly for those of us who have seen the devastation that human error and driving can bring. I want to add, however, that we must not sit back and wait for technology to solve the public health epidemic on our roads. There are actions we can take today, this month, this year that will make an enormous impact and save lives. I urge the Committee to hold a hearing on the need to more aggressively address the increase in traffic fatalities, and work with the safety community and NHTSA to put words into action.

Longer-term, Autonomous Vehicle technology provides the opportunity to eliminate traffic deaths, including drunk driving fatalities. There is a major role for the federal government to

play in ensuring that these vehicles are safe. It is also important to create a national regulatory framework to ensure that the technology can move forward and build public support.

MADD will continue to strongly support the safe development of this technology and work to build public acceptance for the adoption of autonomous vehicles so that people understand the safety benefit of these cars with regard to behavioral safety.

Thank you again for including MADD in this panel. I look forward to working with this committee on this issue and am happy to answer any questions you might have.