

NHTSA Length of Service Ceremony

**Remarks Prepared for Delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elaine L. Chao
NHTSA Length of Service Ceremony
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Thank you, James.

Welcome to your new role as Acting Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The U.S. Department of Transportation looks forward to your leadership.

Let me welcome all of you joining this ceremony today, as well as those watching from our regional offices. I'm so pleased to be here, as you recognize the terrific professionals who have been the backbone of NHTSA for so many years.

During the transition in January 2017, I gave the new non-career staff one essential directive: *Listen to the Career Professionals*. I knew from my previous tenure here at the Department that you are the institutional knowledge and the key to meaningful and sustained accomplishment.

Many NHTSA employees will receive Length of Service Awards today. But, allow me to highlight one individual – Steve Wood – who takes the definition of public service to a new level.

This year marks Steve's 50th anniversary at NHTSA! Congratulations on this remarkable achievement. Your commitment to NHTSA and transportation safety, and your devotion to public service and our country, are an inspiration.

NHTSA has had a busy year. NHTSA's extensive testing and research is leading to safer vehicles and roads. And, NHTSA's life-saving public education campaigns to encourage seat belt use, and discourage distracted and impaired-driving are reaching more and more Americans.

And let me mention the NHTSA team handling the Takata airbag recall. In 2018, the average recall repair rate across all automakers increased by 30 percent. That makes our roads safer for everyone.

I'm also pleased to let you know that on July 13th, I was asked to serve as Honorary Race Director at the NASCAR race in my home state of Kentucky. It was exciting to remind NASCAR leaders, the drivers, and fans alike that the "Buckle Up In Your Truck 225" sponsorship was made by the Kentucky Department of Highway Safety – with funding obtained through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

About 90 percent of drivers and passengers today wear their seatbelts. But, tragically, nearly half of vehicle occupants killed in crashes were not wearing a seat belt. So we still have work to do to get closer to 100 percent.

As the U.S. Department of Transportation works to reduce crashes and fatalities, we are guided by three priorities. The first is: safety, which is always #1.

The result of NHTSA's comprehensive efforts to save lives has been extremely positive. Traffic fatalities have declined 32 percent since 1972. That's remarkable, considering that there has been a 153 percent increase in vehicle miles traveled. In fact, the fatality rate in 1972 was four times higher than it is today.

But the U.S. Department of Transportation – and NHTSA – won't rest on these laurels. Motor vehicle crashes in the U.S. in 2017 killed more than 37,000 people. This includes 5,977 pedestrians, 5,172 motorcyclists and 783 bicyclists. Nearly 3 million adults and children were injured. And the annual economic cost of motor vehicle crashes in the U.S. is over \$240 billion.

Every day, Americans take more than one billion trips – usually via the nation's 4 million miles of roads. So your work is more important today than ever before.

The second priority is rebuilding and refurbishing our country's infrastructure. This is vital to our country's productivity, transportation safety, economic vitality and quality of life for everyone.

This past year alone, the Department distributed more than \$65 billion to help build new infrastructure. The Department works closely with each state's congressional delegation, state and local officials, and transportation leaders, to invest in the infrastructure that is best for their communities.

This Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation are also concerned about the infrastructure needs of America's rural communities, which have traditionally been overlooked. I always say that rural America is not looking for a handout – but, rather, a fair share and an equitable process in the distribution of federal resources.

As you may know, about 19 percent of Americans live in rural areas. And, about one-third of the total vehicle miles traveled in 2017 were in rural areas. Yet, rural areas accounted for 46 percent of all traffic fatalities in 2017. So, from a safety point of view, it is good policy to pay attention to the infrastructure needs of rural America.

And the third priority is preparing for the future – by engaging with emerging technologies to address legitimate public concerns about safety, security, and privacy, without hampering innovation.

NHTSA's innovative training tools include Advanced Roadside Impaired Driving Enforcement, and Drug Recognition Experts. These programs train officers to identify symptoms of impairment by different categories of drugs.

Public awareness efforts are also vital. NHTSA's robust safety agenda includes building on the success of anti-drunk driving campaigns, to launch the first-ever national awareness campaign about the dangers of drug-impaired driving.

Let me close by congratulating all those who received Length of Service Awards today, for your continued commitment to safer transportation and public service.

Thank you.