

Rural Traffic Safety | Western Transportation Institute Roundtable

James Owens, NHTSA Deputy Administrator

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Hi, I'm James Owens, Deputy Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Thank you for joining us today for this virtual event, and I'm so sorry we weren't able to do this in person. I would like to thank the Montana State University's Western Transportation Institute for hosting this discussion, as well as MSU President Wadad Cruzado and Vice President for Research Jason Carter.

I would also like to thank our Secretary of Transportation, Elaine L. Chao, for her leadership on the issue of rural transportation. It's an issue she is passionate about, especially when it comes to safety. As she frequently says, rural America is not looking for a handout – just fairness and equity with the rest of the country.

And, thank you to a strong supporter of rural transportation priorities, United States Senator Steve Daines. Montana has more than 75,000 miles of public roads and the highest rate of car ownership in the country. Sen. Daines is a champion for road safety and transportation investments as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development. Thank you for joining us today.

I'd also like to welcome Congressman Greg Gianforte. Congressman, thank you for your leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives on transportation issues, including your support for the safe development of automated driving systems. Thank you for your time today.

NHTSA's mission is to save lives and reduce the number of crashes on our nation's roads. As you may know, rural areas experience a disproportional number of traffic fatalities. An estimated 19% of Americans live in rural areas, and in 2018, 30% of the vehicle miles traveled were in rural areas. However, these areas accounted for 45% of all traffic fatalities.

In fact, in 2018, the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled was two times higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

Focusing on rural traffic safety has never been more important than now. NHTSA is still collecting and analyzing data about traffic and crashes during the health crisis, and we are seeing signs of safety concerns in rural areas.

Responding to rural crashes can be challenging, as many law enforcement and first responders cover a vast area with scant resources. Response times are often increased due to long distances. Shortly, you'll hear from Raj Subramanian with our National Center for Statistics and Analysis, who will share more on the data and the trends we're seeing.

Rural safety is one of the priorities of our Secretary of Transportation, Elaine L. Chao, who has created a program at the U.S. Department of Transportation called ROUTES: Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success.

ROUTES engages with stakeholders on the needs and benefits of rural transportation infrastructure projects, in a data-driven way. This program will help improve rural infrastructure, move people and goods more efficiently across the country, and most importantly, save lives.

There are many grant programs available for rural transportation projects, but identifying these programs and applying for them can be challenging and time consuming. As part of ROUTES, the USDOT launched an application toolkit to help potential applicants identify and apply for discretionary grant funding opportunities.

The toolkit is designed for all levels of grant applicant experience – we want to encourage everyone to explore grant opportunities and apply for the grants most relevant for your needs. Please visit www.transportation.gov/rural/toolkit for more information.

NHTSA supports many local programs and partnerships. For example, the National Park Service Law Enforcement Liaison program connects our regional offices with national parks to provide media campaigns, occupant protection activities, and impaired driving prevention programs. Our Office of Emergency Medical Services administers the 911 Grant Program to rural and tribal recipients, and the NHTSA-funded Indian Highway Safety program has approximately 50 active highway safety projects on tribal lands.

Additionally, State Highway Safety Offices across the country use NHTSA funding for law enforcement grants for smaller, rural agencies. They frequently receive requests for training from rural agencies where access and availability is limited.

We also want to make sure we're capturing innovative and promising practices from the field, as well as promoting NHTSA initiatives to help address rural safety issues. NHTSA has a rural working group that meets monthly and includes members from across the agency, including most of our regional offices.

There are encouraging areas of improvement in rural traffic safety. Rural alcohol-impaired-driving fatalities decreased by 23% from 2009 to 2018. Still, 4,714 lives were lost in rural impaired-driving crashes, and we want to do everything we can to save lives. Impaired driving is irresponsible, dangerous, and 100% preventable.

The Labor Day holiday weekend is one of the deadliest times on our roads, and we are stepping up to remind everyone Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over.

From August 21 to September 7, thousands of participating state and local law enforcement agencies will be monitoring roadways to protect the public from impaired drivers.

I hope you will consider joining us to spread the word: Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over.

In closing, we have a wonderful group of experts joining us today, and I have no doubt their presentations and discussions will be enlightening and insightful. I appreciate their time, and yours as well.

Stay safe, stay healthy, and thank you very much.