

NHTSA: 50 Years of Safety Keynote Address

James Owens, NHTSA Deputy Administrator

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Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Hi, I'm James Owens, the Deputy Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Thank you for joining us today as we conclude the events marking 50 years of NHTSA's safety mission.

For the past six weeks, we've highlighted NHTSA's work over the last half century to make our roads and vehicles safer than ever. This week, you heard from NHTSA's senior leadership and subject matter experts on many of our focus areas, including occupant protection, impaired driving, recalls, five-star safety ratings, safety technology, our work with the States, and traffic safety and law enforcement.

None of this would be possible without the steadfast leadership and unwavering support of our Secretary of Transportation, Elaine L. Chao. As she frequently says, safety is our number one priority, and I couldn't agree more. Now, we are pleased to have a video from the Secretary on this important milestone.

Thank you, Madam Secretary.

The past six weeks have allowed us to reflect on our work and just how far we have come. We have changed perceptions and behaviors through decades of innovative, attention-grabbing public service announcements. Some of these included beloved celebrities, like Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara, while others introduced us to some groundbreaking dummies.

Let's take a look at some of NHTSA's most memorable PSAs.

Those ads have helped us spread the word about a grave topic: the deadly consequences of unsafe driving behaviors.

At NHTSA, we are focused on keeping Americans safe. Our mission is to save lives, prevent injuries, and reduce economic costs due to road traffic crashes through education, research, safety standards, and enforcement.

Over the past 50 years, we've seen numerous innovations in our cars, trucks, and SUVs, but the next half century promises to revolutionize transportation. That makes our agency and our lifesaving mission more critical than ever.

This occasion is an opportunity to reflect on how far we've come over the past 50 years, and so I'd like to take the next few minutes to talk about NHTSA: past, present, and future.

Let's start with where we've been.

It's easy to forget that, throughout nearly all of history, travel over land has been difficult, slow, and expensive. In Ancient Rome, the cost of a wagonload of grain doubled in price every 50 miles of overland travel. It could take weeks or even months just to travel a few hundred miles.

Modern technology changed all that. First came the canals, then came the railroads. But nothing compared to the automobile.

No other technology democratized prosperity and the freedom to travel like the automobile. In America, the automobile opened the great expanse of our Nation to anyone with access to a car. Prosperity could extend to all parts of our Nation, and the automobile opened up vistas of personal freedom that only the most wealthy previously enjoyed.

Thanks to the automobile, anyone could explore all that our Nation had to offer. City folks could escape to the great outdoors, and rural families could step out for the shopping, dining, or cultural resources available in larger towns.

And in America, we embraced the automobile. There's no feeling quite like driving a car with a stick shift on a twisty open road, on a clear, sunny day, with the windows down.

But freedom isn't free. More automobiles meant more motor vehicle crashes. In fact, almost as many Americans died in crashes in 1970 alone as in 10 years of combat in Vietnam. And the safety risks were well known: This was the era, after all, when Jan and Dean sang about Dead Man's Curve.

Half a century ago, President Nixon and Congress came together to establish NHTSA to address one of the leading causes of death in America: motor vehicle crashes. And so, for the past 50 years, NHTSA has been working to help make cars safer, to raise awareness of safe and unsafe driving behaviors, and to work with our partners in State and local government to advance traffic safety law enforcement.

Thankfully, our roads are much safer today than they were 50 years ago, but we still have a long way to go. Today, there are still too many lives lost on our roads, but the numbers have decreased dramatically. The fatality rate last year was about one-quarter that of 1970 – continuing a decline we have seen for several years in a row.

To advance safety, NHTSA focuses on two main areas: improving the safety of vehicles and improving driving behavior.

Let's start with behavior.

Most serious crashes stem from behavior, and there are four behaviors that cause most of our safety problems: speeding, impaired driving, distracted driving, and failing to wear seat belts.

One crucial part of our mission is to raise awareness about these behaviors and work with our State partners to encourage drivers to avoid them.

The PSAs you saw earlier are part of the toolbox we have to raise awareness, as are safety campaigns like *Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over*, *Click It or Ticket*, or *Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk*.

We've educated bicyclists and motorcyclists about the importance of wearing a helmet and reminded drivers to share the road with other road users.

Next week is Child Passenger Safety Week, when we provide parents with resources to make sure their children are in the right car seat and to ensure that the car seat is installed correctly. In October, we will mark the first-ever national Pedestrian Safety Month.

Of course, NHTSA can't do it on our own. We work closely with the States and territories in traffic safety, providing more than half a billion dollars in grants every year to support traffic enforcement, education, training, and safety programs. We are also supported by many trusted safety advocates who join us in spreading our vital safety messages.

Our efforts are making a difference, and we will continue working with our partners toward a safer tomorrow.

NHTSA also plays an active role in improving vehicle safety. Behavioral change and technological improvement go hand in hand in improving traffic safety.

The past 50 years have seen the development and implementation of numerous safety technology advancements, but these technologies can only save lives if used – and used correctly.

Take the seat belt – it's an incredible piece of safety technology. Since 1975, seat belts have saved an estimated 375,000 lives. But they must be worn to save lives! Seat belt use rates across the country are now above 90 percent, the highest in history.

Here's another example: Some vehicles have features that can assist you in the driving task. But I want to make one thing clear: There are no fully self-driving vehicles available for sale to the public today. Any vehicle you can buy today cannot drive itself and requires an active, attentive, and fully engaged driver ready to act at any time.

Abusing these technologies is, at a minimum, distracted driving. And the consequences, as we all know, can be dangerous, even deadly.

But other factors also influence safety. The average age of a vehicle on our roads today is 12 years old – the oldest ever. And that's a concern because data shows that newer cars are safer cars, thanks to engineering innovations and technology. In fact, when compared to vehicles that are at least 18 years old, you're almost twice as likely to survive a serious crash in a new or nearly new vehicle.

But new car prices are rising, and that means more and more American families – especially younger people and those from disadvantaged communities – increasing can't afford these safer vehicles.

Safety isn't something that should be reserved for the privileged few.

And that's why NHTSA and the Environmental Protection Agency issued the SAFE Vehicles Rule this spring. This rule establishes realistic, achievable fuel economy standards while reducing unnecessary government-imposed costs baked into the price tag.

Thanks to this rule, more hardworking Americans will be able to afford newer, safer, cleaner vehicles that meet their families' unique needs, and those vehicles will be equipped with the latest safety technologies.

This means that more families can live where they choose and go to work, or run errands, or exercise their personal liberties to explore our great Nation, and then get home safely.

Now, it's really important to remember that great lifesaving innovations like seat belts, air bags, and electronic stability control were developed by the auto industry, not the government. They performed the research, did the development, and risked their capital to invest in and launch these lifesaving

innovations. NHTSA supports innovations that save lives and, once the technologies are proven, has moved either to require some of these technologies or otherwise encouraged their adoption.

Our job is to be a watchdog over industry and ensure there is no unreasonable risk to safety in the vehicles we all drive. If we identify an unreasonable risk to safety, we will never hesitate to act to protect the public.

In fact, NHTSA continues to oversee near-record numbers of vehicle and equipment recalls. In 2018, NHTSA oversaw more than 1,000 recalls affecting more than 35 million vehicles and pieces of equipment. In 2019, we monitored 966 recalls involving more than 53 million vehicles and pieces of equipment. We're not sitting still.

NHTSA sets standards for equipment, but we also know that competitive forces truly drive safety innovations. Our successful 5-Star Safety Ratings program is a prime example. The program recognizes excellence in safety performance, giving American families better information that allows them to choose vehicles that provide better protection in the event a crash occurs.

More recently, the program has been expanded to recognize high-performance advanced technology features that can help drivers avoid crashes altogether, and right now we are working to update the program to add even more advanced technologies.

We know that American families vote with their wallets and are increasingly seeking out vehicles with these advanced safety features. That's how backup cameras became a mainstream feature long before NHTSA mandated them.

Our approach prioritizes safety by using market forces to encourage the development of potentially lifesaving technologies quickly. And when we set standards, we always follow sound science, and take regulatory action only when supported by a full study and analysis. Our process takes a lot of effort, but we do this so we can be sure that our action will advance safety. We are and will always remain concerned about unintended consequences of our actions. And as new technologies mature, we will oversee and update or incorporate regulations when appropriate.

Finally, let's talk about the future. I expect our future will involve both great change and continuity.

As for the great change, that's easy. It is no secret that we are in the midst of a revolution in automotive technology. Companies are spending tens of billions of dollars developing new powertrains, enhanced automation, and other innovations. Some of these developments may make our cars cleaner than ever, and others may help make them safer than before, or enhance mobility for underserved communities.

We may see higher levels of automation – perhaps even self-driving vehicles – and we may see technologies that reduce or even eliminate the scourge of impaired driving.

It's possible, maybe even likely, that vehicles several decades from now will be very different from vehicles today. And that's a very exciting future – especially if it saves more lives!

And this revolution means that our agency will have to become nimbler. Technologies are evolving fast these days, and that puts pressure on an agency such as ours that relies heavily on research and sound science before setting regulatory standards.

Federal agencies are not known for being flexible, but NHTSA has learned to be agile to respond to emerging technologies and potential barriers to innovation. Whether it's advanced cruise control, or pedestrian automatic emergency braking, or parallel-parking assist, new technologies have the potential to help us drive safer.

But I'm confident NHTSA will respond to the challenge. As we've learned this year, our agency can find new and innovative ways to do business when exigencies arise, and the can-do spirit that our staff have demonstrated over the past six months will serve us well in the coming years.

I'm also confident that NHTSA will remain true to our principles. Data and research will continue to drive our actions on new technologies, just as they have throughout NHTSA's history. This agency will remain committed to sound science, and, as we have always done, we will take actions based on what the data tell us, because that's the best way – really, the only way – to ensure that our actions are truly enhancing safety. So, while this agency will learn new ways of doing business, we'll still base our decisions on good old-fashioned science.

In closing, NHTSA's mission today is just as critical as it was five decades ago. There are more people and vehicles on our roads than ever before. In fact, there are currently 114 million more registered drivers than there were in 1970, and nearly 180 million more registered vehicles.

NHTSA will continue to work to meet the traveling public's challenges, especially in these unprecedented times. We will continue to look for ways to adapt to the challenges and opportunities presented by new technology.

Our research will continue to inform us, and we will always look for more and better ways to support the public, our partners, our stakeholders. We are steadfast in our commitment to the American people.

Every single one of NHTSA's more than 600 employees is dedicated to this mission, as am I. That's what we've done for the past 50 years – and that's what we'll do for the next 50.

Please, stay safe, and thank you for joining us. We look forward to seeing you on the road ahead to a safer future.