

Agency Information Collection Activities; Proposals, Submissions, and Approvals: Uniform Procedures for State Highway Safety Grant Programs

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Agency: Tennessee Highway Safety Office

The current system of a plan and end-of-year report works well. It allows the states to determine, in advance of the start of the Federal Fiscal Year, an action plan of programs and items that they will attempt to use to decrease fatalities and crashes on roadways throughout the United States. However, as the deadline is so early in the year, agencies' flexibility to utilize an amendment to be presented to their regional National Highway Traffic Safety Administration office is also necessary. States need time to look at the previous year's uncertified FARS data (state data) to determine issue areas to address for the upcoming grant year and the most current certified FARS data. Only utilizing certified FARS data means states are addressing problems that are generally two years old. While highway safety problems do not change often, new technology is constantly being released, which poses a new problem that does not allow states to focus on current issues.

Currently, both the Highway Safety Plan (402 funding) application and the 405 priority area grants are due on the same date. As these applications rely on each other to support the issues that a state is encountering, this deadline being together and the documents depending on each other is beneficial.

During the FAST Act, an automated system was utilized. In theory, this proved to help agencies as it allows for exact information required by the states to receive Federal Funding. This theory should not be discounted, but a more robust, user-friendly system would be necessary. A cradle-to-grave system would eventually make the entire process more beneficial for states. However, the system should be easy to utilize as many individuals of varying degrees of technical ability would need to use this.

The process of submitting a Highway Safety Plan and the 405 applications requires, in some areas of concern, a detailed strategic plan to ensure that a committee of like-minded individuals is working towards a common goal(s). These strategic plans are helpful, but the strategic plans' term does not coincide with the federal fiscal year. Strategic plans are due with the Highway Safety Plan submission on July 1. The strategic plans are generally three-year plans to allow for the committees to long-range plan on one issue. However, if the plan is approved before submitting the Highway Safety Plan, the plan is not a three-year plan as it expires before the end of the third year. Allowing for states to utilize the third federal fiscal year would be helpful. Like grants that the highway safety offices provide that start on October 1 of the year, strategic plans would benefit from following the same format.

One aspect that would enhance the quality of the data that states must provide is to include speed as a high-priority problem area. Speeding is seen nationwide, especially during and directly

following the public health crisis of COVID-19. "Superspeeders" are an everyday occurrence in many states and cause serious harm to not only themselves but others that share the roadway. Using speed as a high-priority area, the federal government can get a more focused approach on this issue and receive a more detailed data set. The Highway Safety Plan and Annual Report require that speeding crashes be a core metric for states to respond on. By providing funding to the states as an emphasis area, states can target this hazardous driver behavior.

The end of the federal fiscal year does require a report to show improvements made by utilizing and implementing sections of the Highway Safety Plan. It allows for agencies to look back at the previous targets set and determine if these were met. However, if a state only utilizes certified FARS data, a state never truly knows if that target was completed as the data is a year old. Using uncertified state data allows for a better understanding of areas that need to be improved upon more quickly. Using data-driven methods means that certain items may not be met. States must convey how they plan to adjust, not the current year that the state is in, but the next fiscal year where the Highway Safety Plan has not been approved.

Assessments are a crucial tool for a highway safety office to determine areas that could be strengthened by "best practices." These assessments can benefit a state. However, assessments are also costly for some states. While some assessments are mandated, others are voluntary. These voluntary assessments are a way to see both weaknesses and as well strengths in a given program. When discussing bicycles and pedestrians, in particular, an assessment can help a state strengthen a growing newer program. However, the state may not receive Federal Funding. Bicycle and pedestrian fatalities are rising at a high rate nationwide. Hearing of best practices from some of the nation's experts pertaining to the subject could help a state lower its fatalities and serious injuries. With so few states receiving federal funds for the high priority issue, it is hard to implement the assessors' recommendations in a timely manner. Again, utilizing data that is two years old to enable a state to receive the funding required to decrease the problem means that the state cannot address the problem before it becomes a more significant issue.