

Lifesavers NHTSA Public Service Awards

Dr. Steven Cliff, NHTSA Deputy Administrator | Keynote

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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Nanda, thank you so much. I'm sorry I can't be there in person, but I appreciate you representing NHTSA at today's luncheon.

I would also like to say thank you to Lifesavers Conference Board Chair John Ulczycki, the Board, and the Lifesavers Planning Committee for their incredible work to ensure this conference is as informative – and safe – as possible. And congratulations on the 40th anniversary of Lifesavers too!

To our in-person and virtual attendees, thank you for joining us as we honor this year's recipients of the NHTSA Public Service Awards. I'm sure those of you in Chicago are enjoying being together after two years apart, and I look forward to joining you in Seattle next year.

I don't have to tell you that we are facing an incredibly challenging time in traffic safety – you have seen it firsthand in your communities. When normal life came to a halt in March 2020, many of us initially expected traffic fatalities to decline as more people stayed home.

Instead, we saw the opposite. Risky behaviors skyrocketed, and traffic fatalities spiked. NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis recently released its annual 2020 traffic crash data, which showed that 38,824 lives were lost on our roads in 2020. That marks the highest number of fatalities since 2007.

Interestingly, the estimated number of police-reported crashes in 2020 decreased by 22 percent, and the estimated number of people injured declined by 17 percent.

In contrast to those declines, however, fatal crashes increased by 6.8 percent.

And in nearly half of fatal crashes, passenger vehicle drivers engaged in at least one of the following risky behaviors: speeding, alcohol impairment, or not wearing a seat belt. And distracted driving remains a concern.

Sadly, the trends we hoped would be limited to 2020 continued into 2021. Our partial-year early estimates for 2021 show similarly disturbing trends. As Secretary Buttigieg said, this is a crisis.

To reverse this, we'll all need to take short-term and long-term actions to ensure these trends don't become the new normal. We have to change the way we approach traffic safety – and change the culture that accepts tens of thousands of deaths on our roads, year after year.

NHTSA and the U.S. Department of Transportation are doing this by embracing the safe system approach. The Department's recently announced National Roadway Safety Strategy adopts the safe system approach and identifies action items for everyone working to save lives on the road.

The safe system approach is people focused, meaning that infrastructure serves users' needs, not the other way around. It considers the needs of everyone on the road. Not just drivers and passengers but pedestrians, cyclists, children, older Americans, and people with disabilities.

It focuses on five key principles: safer people, safer roads, safer vehicles, safer speeds, and post-crash care. All of these principles must work together for our transportation systems to be safe for everyone.

NHTSA's work is fully integrated into all aspects of the safe systems approach. Our work touches on vehicles, technology, behavior, and effective, lifesaving post-crash care.

We will not forget the voices of those who use the roads, particularly those in communities of color, underrepresented communities, and people with disabilities. As we implement the safe system approach, we will always consider the needs of others and prioritize equity.

In fact, safety and equity must go hand in hand. NHTSA's partnerships with law enforcement and the justice system are essential to saving lives. Today and every day, we thank our law enforcement officers for their dedication to protecting our roads from dangerous drivers. And we further thank them for their partnership in prioritizing equity as a foundational element in all aspects of highway safety.

I'd like to touch briefly on safer speeds, as more than a quarter of all traffic deaths involve speeding. The National Roadway Safety Strategy makes more resources available to communities to address this critical issue. And NHTSA is prioritizing equitable traffic enforcement in our programs and in discussions with our stakeholders.

This summer, you'll see a new NHTSA paid media campaign on speeding. It will have both social norming and enforcement components. We recently finished our focus groups on this campaign, and we look forward to sharing it with you.

The National Roadway Safety Strategy will help us all get on the same page, but change takes time. We have to stay vigilant and improve safety now, and the landmark Bipartisan Infrastructure Law gives us unprecedented resources to do just that.

The infrastructure law increases NHTSA's budget by 50 percent, representing the most significant investment in motor vehicle and highway safety since NHTSA was established more than 50 years ago. It also directs us to conduct a number of new research projects and rulemakings, as well as priority programs like child heatstroke prevention.

Speaking of rulemaking – NHTSA continues work on important rules that promote our safety priorities. That includes occupant safety, as we're finalizing a rule for side impact performance standards for child restraint systems. And we'll be implementing the many new requirements under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, including alcohol detection technology.

All of our work focuses on one goal: saving lives. But no one can accomplish this alone. It will take all levels of government, industry, advocates, engineers, and communities across the country working together toward the day when family members no longer have to say goodbye to loved ones because of a traffic crash.

The NHTSA Public Service Award winners we're celebrating today are helping us change the culture and save lives. They're community leaders, volunteers, law enforcement, judges, and transportation leaders. They are implementing programs to address their community's unique needs and teaching the next generation about road safety.

Sadly, two of our recipients are being honored posthumously: Captain David MacAlpine of the New Hanover County Sheriff's Office in North Carolina, and Irene Riojas Rodriguez of the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. I ask you to join us in keeping them in your thoughts.

Thank you to all of our award winners for their dedication to our shared safety mission – we literally could not do it without you.

And with that, I'd like to turn it back over to Nanda for the presentation of the awards. Thank you so much for your time today, and please stay safe.