

Lifesavers NHTSA Public Service Awards Luncheon Keynote

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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Thank you, Barbara. So nice to finally meet you in person, and I appreciate NHTSA's longstanding relationship with GHSA.

I would also like to thank Lifesavers Conference Board Chair Russ Rader, the Board, and the Lifesavers Planning Committee for their incredible work in ensuring this conference is successful. I also appreciate the Lifesavers Board allowing us to hold our distracted driving kickoff press event in the Exhibit Hall earlier this morning – it was a fantastic event. And thanks to everyone here for joining us as we honor the incredible recipients of this year's NHTSA Public Service Awards.

I'm honored to be at Lifesavers representing NHTSA, where I serve as Deputy Administrator (and to be back in my hometown, Seattle!) I joined the agency at the end of January, but I came to NHTSA after two years in the Secretary's Office, where we developed and advocated for what is now the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This transformational legislation will impact Americans for decades to come, and I'm so proud to see safety programs – such as Safe Streets and Roads for All – going out the door to communities.

Earlier in my career, I worked at a state DOT, and I know how meaningful federal dollars and leadership can be to change safety outcomes at the local level. I'm so glad to call NHTSA home now and have a more direct opportunity to work with an amazing team to save lives on our roadways.

I connect deeply with NHTSA's safety-first mission. I had my first child in October of last year, and as a new mom, I think about safety every time I buckle my son into his car seat. Speaking of that, thank you to all the excellent, dedicated CPS technicians and instructors who ensure our most precious passengers are safe. I could not imagine if something happened to him, and I don't want any family to suffer that kind of loss.

Unfortunately, probably everyone in this room knows someone who has been a crash victim. And for some, it meant the death of someone close. These lives can never be replaced. There's no substitute for a spouse, partner, sibling, parent, or best friend. Time heals slowly, but we don't forget. We can honor their memory by striving to make our roads safer and protect everyone.

As Deputy Administrator, I'm here to champion NHTSA's work in saving lives, preventing injuries, and reducing crashes. I am wholly committed to NHTSA's lifesaving mission, and we cannot achieve it without the work and support of everyone here in this very room. We are all partners in traffic safety.

Today, we gather to reflect on the state of traffic safety and to recognize those who have excelled in their field of work. The nine individuals and one organization we will honor in a few minutes are committed to improving their communities, changing the traffic safety culture, and saving lives.

Their work runs the gamut of traffic safety, from young driver safety to move-over laws that protect first responders. They're embracing the safe system approach, weaving it throughout their programs. They're educating the public about the lifesaving benefits of seat belts and preventing impaired driving. They're incorporating equity throughout their work, offering communications in languages other than English. And they are providing child passenger safety assistance to people in need, including refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Thank you to all of our award winners for their dedication to our shared safety mission – we literally could not do it without you. We are inspired by your work and celebrate your accomplishments.

Their work – and all of our work – is urgent because motor vehicle traffic fatalities make up about 95% of all transportation-related deaths in this country.

We are committed to improving safety for all road users – drivers and passengers, pedestrians, cyclists, children, motorcyclists, older Americans, and people with disabilities.

Traffic fatalities and the fatality rate declined consistently for 30 years, but progress has stalled over the last decade and went in the wrong direction in 2020 and 2021. Earlier this week, NHTSA released new data on the 2021 traffic fatality statistics.

In 2021, fatalities increased by 10%, with 42,939 lives lost on our nation's roads. This is the highest number since 2005 and the highest percentage increase since NHTSA's Fatality Analysis Reporting System began collecting data in 1975.

The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled increased to 1.37, a 2.2% increase from what we saw in 2020. And fatalities increased in 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

The risky driving behaviors that increased in 2020 during the pandemic continued into 2021, with speeding, impaired, unbelted, and distracted fatalities all on the rise.

Speaking of distracted driving ... As I mentioned earlier, this morning we kicked off NHTSA's annual U Text. U Drive. U Pay. campaign. It's also National Distracted Driving Awareness Month, and we ask you to join us in spreading the word that distractions can be deadly.

Vulnerable road users bear a heavy burden from distracted driving and other risky driving behaviors. Pedestrian fatalities increased 13% in 2021, and cyclist fatalities rose by 2%.

We are still finalizing preliminary data for 2022, but we are encouraged by what we have seen so far. In the first nine months of 2022, estimated fatalities decreased by 0.2%, halting a trend of rising fatalities. We are optimistic that this will continue.

Still, a 0.2% decline isn't nearly enough. The only thing we can really be satisfied with is zero fatalities. I know that was a lot of numbers – but these are real lives, and driving down fatalities and reaching zero will take a lot of hard work. There's no magic solution.

Instead, it will take dedication from all of you and a combination of factors – including education, enforcement, vehicle design and technology, and infrastructure improvements – to save lives. These are all topics of conversation at Lifesavers, and I hope you'll have many ideas to implement when you go home.

The Secretary has this example I want to share, which is really thought provoking. He says,

“Think about the fact that when somebody is about to get in the car or go somewhere, we might say, ‘drive safe.’ When somebody is headed to a restaurant, we don’t say, ‘eat safe.’”

Now, I share that because, as a society, we’ve accepted a certain level of risk with vehicle travel. If we’re going to reach the day when there are no more vehicle fatalities, we must embrace a new way of thinking.

That’s why NHTSA – and the whole U.S. Department of Transportation – are leaning in on the safe system approach. And I know many of your organizations, cities and states have as well, because the safe system approach is the way we will save lives.

The safe system approach is holistic. It looks at all the factors in traffic fatalities and proposes solutions that address short- and long-term objectives.

The safe system approach is people focused. For example, using a safe system approach, infrastructure is designed and maintained to serve users’ needs.

And the safe system approach is equitable. It considers the needs of everyone on the road, not just drivers and occupants.

This is the cornerstone of the Department’s National Roadway Safety Strategy. We want everyone in the transportation space to consider the strategy’s five key principles: safer people, safer roads, safer vehicles, safer speeds, and post-crash care.

All of these elements need to be part of our focus for our transportation system to function safely for everyone.

Earlier this year, the Department celebrated the first anniversary of the National Roadway Safety Strategy with the release of a progress report. And the Secretary launched a call to action so that all of our stakeholders can share how they are taking action to address roadway safety. Nearly 50 organizations and private-sector companies answered the call on Day One. If your organization hasn’t joined yet, I hope you’ll take a look at the call to action at [Transportation.gov/NRSS](https://www.transportation.gov/NRSS) and sign on.

We know reaching zero is possible because we see communities achieving zero and making tremendous strides in safety. We know it will require consistent, dedicated focus and work from all of you – every level of government, safety advocates, and the private sector.

Solving it will take all of us working together in new ways, with new resources, and with new benchmarks.

Many of our new approaches will originate from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law – or BIL – and its vast new resources for traffic safety.

The law increases NHTSA’s overall budget by more than 50%, representing the most significant investment in motor vehicle and highway safety since NHTSA was established more than 50 years ago.

BIL gives us the resources to implement the safe system approach and the National Roadway Safety Strategy. It also directs us to conduct a number of new research projects and rulemakings.

And NHTSA continues to work as quickly as possible on critical rules that promote our safety priorities. That includes occupant safety, as we're working to publish a rulemaking proposal for seat belt reminder systems in passenger vehicles, as well as finalizing a rule to upgrade the frontal crash test for child restraint systems. And we'll be implementing the many new requirements under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, including automatic emergency braking, or AEB.

And, of course, we recently published the final rule implementing the State Highway safety programs under BIL, which includes expanding States' planning horizons by introducing a three-year Highway Safety Plan.

As I mentioned earlier, BIL also established the new Safe Streets and Roads for All grant program, with \$5 billion over the next five years.

This program funds regional, local, and tribal initiatives through grants to prevent roadway deaths and serious injuries. In February, the Secretary announced the first round of funding, with more than \$800 million going to 510 communities nationwide.

I encourage you to apply for the next round of grants. In fact, the The Fiscal Year 2023 Notice of Funding Opportunity is now open through July 10. It's live on [Grants.gov](https://www.grants.gov) and open for applications. Please note that late applications aren't accepted, so I encourage you to review the grant process and get started on yours now.

Please take advantage of this and all the other federal grants available to help you make your communities safer places for everyone to live, work and play.

The traffic safety community is special, because we are united in one of the noblest goals – saving lives. By embracing the safe system approach and committing to the day we can see zero fatalities, we make our roads safer for everyone, no matter how they drive, walk, bike, ride, or roll.

Thank you so much for your time and for having me here today. And now, Barb and Caroline, please join me for the presentation of the 2023 NHTSA Public Service Awards.