

National Distracted Driving Coalition

National Meeting Keynote

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Good morning, and thank you, Steve [Kiefer], for that kind introduction. Steve and I were in Seattle together a few weeks ago to kick off the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's *U Drive. U Text. U Pay.* campaign. Steve, thank you for your advocacy and for sharing your son Mitchel's story.

I'm pleased to be with you all today to discuss distracted driving, a critical safety issue on our nation's roadways. Jennifer [Smith], thank you for convening this important national meeting and continuing to shine a spotlight on the risks of distracted driving. NHTSA is proud to be a member of the National Distracted Driving Coalition's Steering Committee and to join you in seeking solutions to this problem.

Thank you to NTSB Vice Chair Bruce Landsberg for your leadership in forming the Coalition and bringing together so many partners to create a traffic safety culture of attentive drivers. We have a good working relationship with the NTSB and always welcome their input.

Distracted driving is dangerous and deadly. It's also completely preventable. When you're behind the wheel, there's nothing more important than driving. April may be Distracted Driving Awareness Month, but distracted driving is dangerous all year long.

Earlier this month, NHTSA released updated numbers that underscore the risk of distracted driving. According to police crash reports, fatalities in distraction-affected crashes increased by 12% in 2021, making these deaths 8.2% of all fatalities reported.

According to the police reports, in 2021 we lost 3,522 friends, family members and neighbors to distracted driving. Their loss will have a lasting impact on those who knew and loved them. Many of you in this room have suffered such losses, and my heart goes out to you all.

Sadly, these numbers likely don't capture the full extent, as it's difficult to detect distraction during crash investigations, and we know that police reports are likely to understate the incidence of distraction.

This is why NHTSA continues to approach the problem of distraction from many angles. We recently published a report that found that distraction was involved in 29% of all crashes, resulting in 10,546 fatalities, 1.3 million nonfatal injuries, and \$98.2 billion in economic costs in 2019.

Larry Blincoc from NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis will have more for you later today, including lessons learned from this critical research.

These numbers are staggering, and the agency is committed to eliminating this risky behavior from our roads.

NHTSA estimates that 42,795 people died in motor vehicle crashes in 2022. And while this represents a slight decrease from 2021, it is still far too high. NHTSA is committed to improving safety for all road

users – drivers and passengers, pedestrians, cyclists, children, motorcyclists, older Americans, and people with disabilities.

The numbers tell us that the United States has a traffic safety crisis. Changing this culture – and saving lives – will require a transformational and collaborative approach to safety.

We can do this by embracing the safe system approach. This approach puts people first – where the system serves the needs of its users, not the other way around. NHTSA and the U.S. Department of Transportation are adopting the safe system approach, as are state and local governments across the country.

If you haven't seen it, I encourage you to look at the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Roadway Safety Strategy. The strategy identifies action items for everyone working to save lives on the road and includes the key belief that humans make mistakes – but that those mistakes should not be fatal.

We need to use the safe system approach embraced in the National Roadway Safety Strategy to dramatically decrease the number and severity of crashes. The safe system approach means using every tool in our toolbox, including research, technology, laws, and enforcement, to help save lives.

NHTSA continues to engage in a variety of efforts to reduce all forms of distracted driving and associated crashes and injuries, including through our research. We are actively working on a comprehensive literature review covering multiple aspects of distracted driving.

We're also working on human factors research to understand the relationship between distracted driving and technology.

We have a new research project underway focused on distraction and driver monitoring systems. In this project, we will examine several aspects, including new strategies to assess attention management behind the wheel.

We are also interested in how deploying more advanced driver assistance features in vehicles affects drivers' engagement and have several projects underway to study this issue.

In addition to research, we're also considering ways to keep drivers focused on the road. After all, we know that many drivers struggle with the technology we already have, using their phones while behind the wheel. The pull of that text or alert is just too strong for many to ignore.

Most phones today have "do not disturb" or driving features, which we encourage everyone to use. You can minimize the temptation to check your phone by using these features, or by putting your phone out of reach, like in the glove compartment or in a bag in the back of your car. Take the phone out of the equation, and you will significantly reduce the distraction risk – and the risk of a crash.

Vehicle safety technologies can also help protect those inside and outside the vehicle in the event of a crash. In fact, NHTSA is working on rulemakings to require automatic emergency braking, or AEB, in new light- and heavy-duty vehicles, including pedestrian AEB in light vehicles. Once deployed, AEB can bring vehicles to a complete halt before a crash occurs or can dramatically slow vehicles down, causing significantly less damage and injuries.

We are also working on upgrades to our New Car Assessment Program, also known as NCAP or the 5-Star Safety Ratings program, and we've proposed adding lane keeping support, pedestrian AEB, blind spot warning, and blind spot intervention to the ratings.

All these technologies can help protect vulnerable road users, who bear a heavy burden from distracted and other risky driving behaviors. In fact, pedestrian fatalities increased 13% in 2021, and cyclist fatalities rose by 2%.

Many of these advanced driver assistance technologies are widely available in top models but less so in more affordable vehicles. Including these technologies in our NCAP ratings will spur wider fleet integration. NCAP leverages market forces to encourage manufacturers to design higher levels of safety into their vehicles and make optional safety features standard.

In addition to research and rulemaking, NHTSA promotes effective countermeasures to combat distracted and other forms of risky driving.

We know that strong laws coupled with fair and equitable enforcement not only help us change people's attitudes about safety risks; they help us change behavior. In fact, 25 states have a primary handheld cell phone ban for all drivers.

And high-visibility enforcement is an effective deterrent to distracted driving. As I mentioned earlier, NHTSA just wrapped up our annual *U Drive. U Text. U Pay.* high-visibility enforcement campaign, which focuses on preventing texting and distracted driving. Today and every day, we thank our law enforcement officers for their dedication to protecting the traveling public from dangerous drivers. And we further thank them for their partnership in prioritizing equity as a foundational element in all aspects of highway safety.

Many communities are also using or considering automated enforcement, which I know is something that the Coalition has called for in your recent report. From research, we know that people will accept speed cameras if they know the cameras are there to make the road safer, not to generate revenue. For example, New York City saw a decrease in pedestrian fatalities and crash injuries at locations with speed safety cameras.

As cities adopt speed cameras, we encourage them to engage with their community, especially communities of color, to ensure these cameras are used fairly and not punitively. The goal must be safety, deployed equitably.

And now, thanks to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law states are allowed to use NHTSA grant funds for automated enforcement in school and work zones. The law also initiated changes to the distracted driving grant program, making it easier for more states to qualify.

All these measures will help save lives.

NHTSA is committed to working with all our safety stakeholders, including everyone in this room, to stop distracted driving. As I've outlined over the past few minutes, there's no magic wand to solve this problem. Instead, it will take all of us working together on many aspects, including data collection, research, technology, laws, and equitable enforcement, to change behaviors and save lives.

I want to take this opportunity to encourage all Americans to consider the lives of others while on the road and put an end to risky behavior behind the wheel, especially distracted driving. Remember, it only takes a moment to change your life forever. Looking away from the road for even a second can have devastating consequences. Nothing's worth the risk. Put down the phone and just drive.

Thank you so much for your time today, and your commitment to this very important issue.