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TESTIMONY BY PAUL SNODGRASS
NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION
TO THE NEVADA SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE
ON A STANDARD SAFETY BELT LAW

April 10, 2003

I would like to thank your Committee Secretary, Sherry Rodriguez, for inviting us to testify today. My name is Paul Snodgrass and I am a Regional Program Manager with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), an agency of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Our goal at NHTSA is to reduce the annual toll of some 42,000 deaths, 3,000,000 injuries, and \$230 billion in societal costs due to motor vehicle crashes in America.¹ I would like to discuss how a standard safety belt law can help reduce the number of deaths and injuries on Nevada's roadways each year. There is no reason why anyone should die or become seriously injured because of the lack of a safety belt. As an agency, NHTSA is clearly focused on safety belt use because it is the single most effective way to prevent death or injury in a car crash.

Research shows that the enactment and enforcement of strong safety belt laws are effective at increasing safety belt use. There is specific State legislation that has proven effective in raising the safety belt use rates in States that adopt it. I will be testifying on the merits of upgrading your safety belt law to one allowing standard, sometimes called "primary" enforcement.

As you are likely aware, standard enforcement allows a law enforcement officer to stop a vehicle and issue a citation when the officer observes an unbelted driver or passenger. Secondary enforcement, which is what Nevada has now, means that a citation for not wearing a safety belt can only be written after the officer stops the vehicle or cites the offender for another infraction. In States with secondary laws, a police officer can stop a motorist for a malfunctioning tail light or an expired license plate tag, but cannot stop a motorist for violating the State's safety belt law.

We believe that a standard law will not only save lives and reduce injuries in Nevada, but will also save Nevada citizens substantial amounts of money in associated health care costs.

Standard belt laws have a proven track record of increasing State safety belt use rates:

- In June 2002, the average safety belt use rate in States with standard enforcement laws was 11 percentage points higher than in States without standard enforcement laws.ⁱⁱ (Safety belt use was 80 percent in primary law States versus 69 percent in States without primary enforcement.)
- When States upgrade their laws from secondary to primary, dramatic increases in safety belt use are observed. For example, when three States—New Jersey, Alabama, and Michigan—upgraded their secondary safety belt laws to primary laws in 2000:
 - The safety belt use rate in New Jersey rose from 63 percent in 1999 to 74 percent in 2000.
 - The safety belt use rate in Alabama rose from 58 percent in 1999 to 71 percent in 2000.
 - The safety belt use rate in Michigan rose from 70 percent in 1999 to 84 percent in 2000.

In 2001, Washington State upgraded their law to primary, and as a result their safety belt use rate rose from 82.6% to 92.6% in 2002.

- If Nevada can increase its safety belt use rate by 11 percentage points by passing a standard belt use law, it is estimated that 23 lives could be saved, and 92 serious injuries prevented, in Nevada each year.

Primary safety belt laws also help save the lives of children. Citizens are much more likely to buckle up and place their children in child safety seats when there is the possibility of receiving a citation for not doing so. NHTSA and State surveys have repeatedly and consistently shown that adult safety belt use is a strong predictor of whether children are also buckled up. However, in 2000, one out of

every three children 5 to 15 years of age was unrestrained and traffic crashes are the leading cause of death among children in this age group.

But are safety belts really effective in reducing deaths and injuries in vehicle crashes? Consider the following:

- Safety belts reduce the risk of death to front seat passenger car occupants by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injury by 50 percent. For light truck occupants, safety belts reduce the risk of death by 60 percent and moderate to critical injury by 65 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In 2001, 70 per cent of the vehicle occupants who died in Nevada were not wearing safety belts.
- And remember, even if you are a good driver, wearing your safety belt is your best defense against drunk, drowsy, or aggressive drivers.

Now let's address the economic costs of not wearing safety belts. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) published a report^{iv} on the economic impact of crashes for 2000 and found the following:

- In 2000, safety belt use saved about \$50 billion in medical care, lost productivity, and other injury related costs.
- Conversely, safety belt non-use cost society about \$26 billion.^v
- The lifetime economic cost to society for each traffic fatality is over \$977,000. Over 80 percent of this amount is attributable to lost workplace and household productivity.
- Each critically injured survivor costs an average of \$1.1 million. Medical costs and lost productivity account for 84 percent of the cost for this most serious level of non-fatal injury.
- A key finding of the report was that those *not* directly involved in crashes pay for nearly *three-quarters* of all crash costs, primarily through insurance premiums, taxes, and travel delay. In 2000, these costs—borne by society rather than by crash victims—totaled over \$170 billion for all traffic crashes.

Safety belts save lives:

- In 2000, safety belts prevented 11,889 fatalities and approximately 325,000 serious injuries.
- Conversely, safety belt non-use represents an enormous lost opportunity for injury prevention. In 2000 alone, more than 9,200 persons were killed and 143,000 were injured unnecessarily because they failed to wear their safety belts.^{vi}

Thank you again for inviting me to testify. I hope the information I have provided is helpful. I would be glad to answer any questions.

ⁱ The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes 2000. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; DOT HS 809 446, p. 1.

ⁱⁱ Data accessed from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration web site at <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/Rpts/2002/Belt&HelmetUseNOPUS.pdf> on September 10, 2002.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kahane, Charles J. Fatality Reduction by Safety Belts For Front-Safety Occupants of Cars And Light Trucks; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, December 2000; DOT HS 809 199.

^{iv} The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes 2000. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; DOT HS 809 446, pp. 5-7.

^v The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes 2000. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; DOT HS 809 446, p. 54.

^{vi} The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes 2000. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; DOT HS 809 446, p. 54.