



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**National Highway
Traffic Safety
Administration**

1200 New Jersey Avenue SE.
Washington, DC 20590

January 27, 2010

Dear Colleague:

As we begin a new calendar year and planning for the next two fiscal years, I think it is important to take stock of where we are and what we need to do to move forward. First, and most important, the Agency is fortunate to have a new Administrator, David L. Strickland. Administrator Strickland has enjoyed a long and successful career, most recently with the United States Senate, working on highway and vehicle safety issues. He is very knowledgeable about our issues, about the formulation of public policy, and about getting things done. I know we will benefit from his leadership, and I know he looks forward to meeting and working with each of you.

Reviewing the last two years, each of you, and our State and national organization partners, should be proud of the results documented in the most recent highway safety data. The 2008 numbers are very impressive:

- The lowest number of total highway fatalities since 1961
- The lowest fatality rate in history
- The highest safety belt usage in history
- A more than 9% reduction in alcohol-related fatalities

We all recognize that the largest economic downturn since the Great Depression contributed to a reduction in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by the American public and that fact is a major contributor to most of these significant safety improvements. That said, the reductions in fatalities and injuries were larger than the reductions in VMT. The improved safety performance was not solely due to economic factors but I believe to the hard work that you and our partners do on a day-to-day basis to make a safety difference on our streets and highways. Our challenge is to build on the momentum we have and to strive not only not to give any of these reductions back as the economy and VMT grow together, but to redouble our efforts to maintain the downward direction of the numbers.

Impaired driving continues to be a national problem and one of the leading causes of highway fatalities. In 2008, almost 12 thousand people died in crashes where a driver had a BAC of 0.08 or higher. While considerably lower than in previous years, this number is still unacceptably high, and we must continue to use all the tools at our disposal to reduce the toll. As we know, addressing this problem takes a combination of problem identification and data analysis to establish trends and problems, strong laws, high-visibility enforcement and program evaluation.

Ignition interlocks have shown great promise in reducing recidivism while installed, yet many States have not deployed these life-saving devices. We plan for the Agency to host an interlock summit later this year to invite States to discuss strategies to increase the use of interlocks, and legal and administrative hurdles to more widespread adoption. We need to continue to analyze issues surrounding interlock adoption, and provide technical assistance to help States overcome problems deterring them from expanding their use.

Occupant protection is another perennial NHTSA concern: in 2008, 13,250 lives were saved by the use of seat belts, making correct use of belts the most effective countermeasure available. Nonetheless, **16** percent of observed passenger vehicle occupants did not use belts in 2009, and approximately 12,850 vehicle occupant fatalities were unbelted. If all passengers over the age of 4 had worn belts, an additional 4,150 lives could have been saved. Given this potential, we must continue to encourage States to adopt measures to increase belt usage. The most effective measure, of course, is adoption of a primary belt law, which has been shown to increase belt use by 8 percent or more. 2010 may be the last year in which Section 406 incentive funding will be available, so we must make a concerted effort to encourage the 20 states without PBLs to adopt them this year, while incentive funding is still available. And all States need to dedicate themselves to achieving and maintaining high use rates, by expanding and intensifying high visibility enforcement campaigns, and focusing on groups, locations, and times with low belt use rates.

Distracted driving is a new focus area for the Department and NHTSA, and is a growing problem. The Secretary's Distraction Summit revealed that distracted driving is a significant safety concern, tied to almost 6,000 fatalities last year. NHTSA has invigorated its distracted driving research agenda, initiated demonstration projects to evaluate the safety impact of the high visibility enforcement model in reducing distracted driving, issued public service announcements, and begun working on model State texting legislation. The proliferation of communication and location technology will present more opportunity for distraction, and we need to research and deploy countermeasures before the problem worsens.

While these safety issues affect everyone, some citizens are particularly at risk, particularly youth and older drivers. Their crash rates are dramatically higher than those of other drivers, and they are also overrepresented in pedestrian crashes. We will be unable to significantly reduce the number and severity of crashes and pedestrian fatalities without addressing the particular

vulnerabilities of these groups. NHTSA has worked with the driver education and licensing communities to develop standard driver education curricula, and administrative practices. We see this as a supplement to strong GDL standards in the States. We need to vigorously promote GDL, which effectively supports our core drunk driving and seat belt efforts and adds a much-needed extra level of protection for novice drivers.

Older driver health and well-being can be dependent on mobility and DOT supports their continued driving as long as they can safely do so. We have developed, in cooperation with medical professionals and licensing officials, a variety of resources for helping assure the safety of older drivers, including medical guidelines, assessment tools, training protocols, scripts for children, caregivers, and others, and model screening programs. We need to work with licensing agencies, law enforcement personnel, and medical professionals to make sure that States have strong and enforceable, licensing, and screening laws and procedures, and provide them technical assistance in adopting and implementing these procedures to allow for individual determinations of older driver qualification whenever possible.

Finally, our mission is not restricted solely to pursuing and achieving highway safety countermeasure improvements nationwide. NHTSA has another critical mission, particularly in these difficult economic times marked by increasingly constrained resources. We must continue to be mindful of our role as stewards of public resources and ensure that grantees and contractors alike expend federal money appropriately and expeditiously. This not only includes making sure that States properly oversee contractors and grantees and comply with relevant spending and auditing criteria, but also means that we must monitor the design and development of all our programs to guarantee that they are based on data and properly implemented and managed.

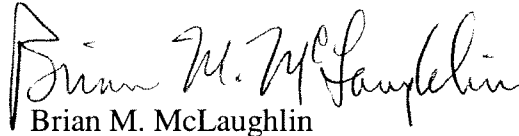
A major step forward was made last year when States began collecting and reporting on standard performance measures. Reaching consensus on these measures was a major accomplishment for the agency and our partners, for which we can be justly proud. These measures will allow States to monitor their performance, evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, and adjust programs and resource allocations. The measures also enable NHTSA to provide effective and appropriate oversight. We need to work closely with the States, offering technical assistance and advice, to engage in constructive discussions about progress and program planning. The performance measures can facilitate a new level of collaboration between NHTSA and the States and steer critical program development, but only if they are used effectively by both parties.

This Agency and the highway safety community have enjoyed significant success over the last 2 years, and 2010 promises to be another great year for highway safety. We will be challenged, not only to maintain, but to accelerate this progress in the future. In that regard the greatest asset we have is our highly-motivated, professional, NHTSA staff and partners. What is accomplished in making our roadways safer is directly due to your efforts and those of the people you work with everyday at the State, community level and with the many national organizations committed to safety.

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I thank you for your dedication and continued pursuit of excellence and wish you continued success in FY 2010 and beyond.

Sincerely yours

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian M. McLaughlin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "B".

Brian M. McLaughlin
Senior Associate Administrator,
Traffic Injury Control