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AMERICAN LEGISLATIVE EXCHANGE COUNCIL
CONFERENCE ON SAFETY BELTS
DALLAS, TEXAS
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I am delighted to have this occasion to share my thoughts about highway safety with so many state legislators. I deeply appreciate the American Legislative Exchange Council's superb job in making this Transportation Safety Conference a big success.

We Americans have great respect for human life, and the Reagan Administration is committed to safety policies that reflect our people's values. State safety belt laws are very much a part of those policies.

Safety belts are a proven lifesaver. They can mean the difference between life and death, between minor scrapes and debilitating injuries. But only about 15 percent of Americans "buckle up."

However, the beautiful constancy about America and its people is the ability of our public officials to rise to leadership on difficult issues. And that's exactly what many of you already are doing in your support of safety belt use laws in your own states. New York, New Jersey, and Illinois have already enacted such laws. A Michigan law will be signed by the Governor next week. In addition, more than 30 state legislatures and the District of Columbia have safety belt use laws pending for consideration this year. I know that the safety belt use law isn't an easy issue. People on both sides feel very strongly. Some people may prefer to see automatic occupant restraint in every car. They will be in all new cars manufactured on or after September 1, 1989, if two-thirds of our people are not by that time covered by state safety belt use laws. Some may prefer to see their states enact belt usage laws and leave the choice about automatic protection to individuals. It is your privilege, your choice, your decision. The Reagan Administration is giving you the choice.

Many of the state legislators who sponsored the early legislation had been crash victims or seen what happens when people don't take the time to "buckle up." If you have any doubts about the effectiveness of safety belts, I urge you to ask Senator Raymond Lesniak, the sponsor of the safety belt law in New Jersey was wearing his safety belt when his car was hit from behind. The legislator said he jumped out of the car and saw the man and woman in the other car. They were not wearing safety belts, and their heads were smashed against the windshield.

Public awareness of how vital safety belts can be was intensified last fall, when country singing star Barbara Mandrell was involved in a head-on collision. Metal crashed into metal at a combined speed of more than 100 miles per hour. Miss Mandrell suffered a broken leg, broken ankle bones, knee injuries and a severe concussion. But she is alive today because she was wearing her safety belt. Her two sons also escaped serious injuries because they too were belted. The driver of the other car was not wearing a seat belt and was killed.

These are just a sample of the growing awareness. We have worked to define the causes and consequences of traffic fatalities in human terms. Forty-three thousand deaths a year is a national tragedy, but for the severely injured -- the thousands of Americans who are disfigured or disabled -- the pain lingers on -- as do the costs. Auto accidents alone cost the American taxpayers almost \$2 billion a year in Federal public assistance programs. We found that drunk driving and the failure of most people to use the safety belts already in their cars were the main causes of the nation's traffic death toll. With the help of many people we have a very real prospect for making dramatic progress in the next few years. Groups such as the National Automobile Dealers Association, working with the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association and the Automobile Importers of America, are informing millions of people about the benefits of safety belt use. So are members of the American Medical Association, members of the insurance industry and many others. As more legislators debate the issue, I am confident the groundswell of support will continue.

Safety belts are such an easy choice for saving lives now. Effectively enforced state safety belt usage laws could save an estimated 6,700 lives a year immediately and prevent thousands of serious injuries. If everyone buckled up, more than 10,000 lives could be saved annually. And because safety belts are already standard equipment on virtually every car on the road, we could achieve these safety gains without adding a cent to the cost of a car.

Many foreign countries already have adopted safety belt use laws and have seen both dramatic increases in safety belt usage and reductions in fatalities and injuries. Great Britain, for example, increased its safety belt usage rate from 40 percent prior to its 1983 law to about 90 percent; fatalities have declined 25 percent. Just last week I heard from Prime Minister Thatcher how effective this law has been in reducing fatalities and serious injuries in Great Britain.

But we no longer have to look to Great Britain for success. We have our own success story in New York. Preliminary data show that safety belt usage in New York has jumped from 17 percent to an estimated 70 percent since the New York law took effect the first of the year.

And that success story will grow all across America as you debate this important issue, make your own judgment and take action. I am confident many of you will support lifesaving safety belt measures. I urge you to join in this effort. And we can work together on this important issue as we have on so many others in the past.

Thank you very much and God bless you all.

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