

REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY  
SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION ELIZABETH HANFORD DOLE  
NEW HAMPSHIRE ALLIANCE FOR SAFETY BELTS RECEPTION  
MANCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE  
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Thank you Russ (MacCleery, representative of Traffic Safety Now), for that very kind introduction, and thank you, Governor Sununu and members of the New Hampshire legislature, for taking the time to show your concern for the vital issues of highway safety. I deeply appreciate the work Representative Toni Pappas and Dr. Gary Woods of the New Hampshire Alliance for Safety Belts have done in bringing so many of you together.

We Americans have great respect for human life, and as Transportation Secretary, I am committed to safety policies that reflect our people's values. I have made safety my highest mandate and my foremost responsibility. My interest in safety extends to all forms of transportation. My Department, for example, has conducted an intensive "white-glove" inspection of some 400 U.S. air carriers to assure that all safety requirements are being met both in the air and on the ground. We are addressing the problems of drinking and drugs on the railroads, safety in boating and the movement of hazardous materials on our highways.

My principal focus is on highway safety, because -- as you may know -- more than 90 percent of all transportation fatalities occur in traffic accidents. I applaud the efforts of the New Hampshire Alliance for Safety Belts because safety belts are a proven lifesaver. They can mean the difference between life and death, between minor

scrapes and debilitating injuries. Nevertheless, only about 15 percent of Americans "buckle up." More than 40,000 people will be killed in traffic accidents this year. Nearly half of the victims will be occupants of the front seat of passenger cars. More than 300,000 will be seriously injured. Many of those fatalities and injuries could be prevented by the use of safety belts.

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. I know that the safety belt use law isn't an easy issue. People on both sides feel very strongly.

I'm sure you've heard the argument against mandatory safety belt use laws, claiming they would be "federally-imposed." This is a myth. If I leave you with no other message today, I want you to know this: the federal government is not trying to force any legislature to pass mandatory safety belt use laws. We are giving the American people the option between automatic crash protection systems -- such as air bags or automatic safety belts -- and safety belt use laws. Our occupant protection decision, which is required by federal laws as interpreted by the Supreme Court, says that one or the other must go into effect.

We recognize that some people may prefer to see automatic occupant restraints 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. Instead of mandating a single approach, the Reagan Administration is giving you the choice.

I do want to emphasize that safety belts offer the advantage of 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 start achieving these safety gains immediately and 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.

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 17 percent to an estimated 70 percent since the New York law took effect the first of the year. And data just released shows that traffic deaths in New York were down by 27 percent the first three months the law was in force.

I am heartened that so many New Hampshire legislators have sensed the difference that a safety belt law can make. I congratulate you for moving safety belt legislation forward from committee to the floor this year, and I urge you to redouble your efforts to have the bill enacted next year. I would very much like to see New Hampshire join the growing number of states whose lawmakers recognize how much the economic well-being of our free society could be strengthened by universal use of safety belts. The social cost of traffic accidents -- in medical insurance, legal costs

and so forth -- is estimated at \$57 billion a year. With greater safety belt use we have a very real opportunity to reduce this needless waste.

I also want you to know how much I appreciate New Hampshire's approval of a minimum age 21 drinking law. You may know that more than half of the nation's traffic deaths -- as many as 25,000 a year -- are related to the use of alcohol.

All of us here tonight probably know someone killed or injured by an alcohol or drug-impaired driver. No one is immune, and among young people, in particular, the death toll is high. All too often the culprit is a repeat offender, perhaps driving with a suspended license.

Our files, our memories, are filled with similar stories -- of a young boy struck down while waiting for the ice cream truck, by a driver with six prior convictions for drunk driving, but who had never spent a day in jail; of a high school girl riding her bicycle on a bike path, hit by a drunk driver whose car jumped the curb -- a driver on probation from an earlier drunk driving arrest; of Cari Lightner, killed as she walked to a church carnival. Her mother, Candy Lightner, launched the grassroots protest against drunk driving that has reached into courtrooms and state legislatures all across the country. The organization she started -- Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) -- along with other similarly dedicated groups, and the impact they have had, exemplify what concerned citizens can achieve in making changes in our society.

Not many years ago drunk drivers were excused as a social problem and their criminal actions swept under the rug. But there's been a consciousness-raising in this country. Americans are no longer willing to tolerate lax laws and lenient judges. I

believe a minimum legal drinking age of 21 should be adopted by all states because experience proves it saves lives. In nine states where the age level was raised, traffic fatalities over a three-year period declined 28 percent.

I meet whenever I can with young people who share my concern over teen-age drinking and driving. There are now more than 6,000 chapters of an organization called SADD -- Students Against Drunk Drivers. They're involved because they know that alcohol-related accidents are the leading cause of death for young people in the 15-to-24 age group. They know that while these drivers make up only 20 percent of the motorist population, they are involved in an alarming 42 percent of all fatal alcohol-related crashes.

Just this morning I was honored to be a guest at an assembly of a thousand high school students at West High School here in Manchester. This weekend is the high school prom, and the students had assembled to consider the dangers of mixing drinking and driving.

No one can address this problem more eloquently or persuasively than our young people themselves. I truly marvel at the concern and the energy so many of them are devoting to the safety of their friends and neighbors. Here in Manchester and elsewhere in New Hampshire, high school students are raising funds through car washes and bake sales to finance volunteer educational campaigns against drunk and drugged driving. Some have even been so creative and enterprising as to have produced public service television messages.

We could make so many constructive strides in traffic safety today if we would just listen to our children. I want to compliment you on the very impressive young people here in New Hampshire. Those I have met are so level-headed and full of good will that I cannot help but believe that New Hampshire's next generation of leadership will continue in the finest tradition of your state.

Thank you so much.

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