



ADVOCATES
FOR HIGHWAY
& AUTO SAFETY



March 17, 2021

The Honorable Dan Ruby, Chair
The Honorable Tom Kading, Vice Chair
House Transportation Committee
North Dakota Legislative Assembly
600 East Boulevard Avenue
Bismarck, North Dakota 58505-0360

Dear Chairperson Ruby and Vice Chairperson Kading:

The North Dakota Public Health Association, North Dakota Emergency Nurses Association, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (Advocates), and KidsAndCars.org support passage of Senate Bill (SB) 2121, legislation that will upgrade North Dakota's seat belt law to primary enforcement for all occupants. A comprehensive seat belt law is vital to overcome the public health epidemic of traffic fatalities and injuries and to ensure the health and safety of North Dakota families and visitors who travel on state roads.

In 2019, 100 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes in North Dakota, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Lack of restraint use is a major contributing factor to traffic deaths and injuries. Fifty-eight percent of passenger vehicle occupants killed in 2019 were unrestrained, based on known use (NHTSA). Over the ten-year period of 2010 to 2019, motor vehicle crashes claimed the lives of nearly 1,300 people in North Dakota (NHTSA). Traffic crashes are a serious issue in urgent need of the effective solution provided by an all-occupant primary enforcement seat belt law.

Seat belts are proven lifesavers, but they are only effective when they are used. Seat belt use rates increase from 10 to 15 percentage points when primary laws are passed, as experienced in a number of states. A study conducted by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) found that when states strengthen their laws from secondary to primary enforcement, driver death rates decline by an estimated seven percent.

Seat belts not only save lives and prevent lifelong debilitating injuries, they also save taxpayer dollars. Motor vehicle crashes cost North Dakota over \$700 million annually (NHTSA). Unbelted crash victims have medical bills that are 55 percent higher than belted victims, and society bears a majority of the cost through increased insurance premiums, taxes and health care costs (NHTSA). It is estimated that needless deaths and injuries resulting from non-use of seat belts cost society more than \$10 billion annually in medical care, lost productivity, and other injury related costs based on 2010 data.ⁱ When adjusted solely for inflation, this amounts to over \$12 billion per year.ⁱⁱ Fortunately, there is an available solution to curb these costs. If every state with a secondary seat belt law upgraded to primary enforcement, about 1,000 lives and \$4 billion (2005 US\$) in crash costs could be saved every year.ⁱⁱⁱ When adjusted solely for inflation, this amounts to \$5.5 billion per year.^{iv}

Furthermore, the majority of passengers in the rear seats of vehicles are teens and children, and studies have shown that seat belt usage by teens and young adults (age 16 – 24) is among the lowest segments of society (NHTSA). Research has found unbelted rear seat passengers pose a serious threat to the driver and other vehicle occupants, as well as themselves. Unbelted rear seat passengers are known as “back seat bullets” because they can be thrust at high rates of speed into the driver resulting in loss of control of the vehicle and into other occupants causing fatalities and serious injuries. The chance of death for a belted driver seated directly in front of an unrestrained passenger in a serious head-on crash was “2.27 times higher than if seated in front of a restrained passenger.”^v Upgrading North Dakota’s seat belt law to primary enforcement for all occupants will send a strong message to drivers and passengers that everyone needs to buckle up on every trip.

Over the past year, our Nation has struggled with the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19. As we continue our road to recovery, we ask you to advance this proven solution to protect road users and keep them out of overly-burdened emergency rooms and hospitals as well as curb the expenditure of taxpayer dollars.

Sincerely,

North Dakota Public Health Association

North Dakota Emergency Nurses Association

Catherine Chase, President
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety

Janette Fennell, President and Founder
KidsAndCars.org

cc: Members of the House Transportation Committee

ⁱ The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2010 (Revised), NHTSA, May 2015 (Revised), DOT HS 812 013.
ⁱⁱ CPI Inflation Calculator, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, available at https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm
ⁱⁱⁱ The Nation’s Top Strategies to Stop Impaired Driving: Primary Seat Belt Laws, NHTSA, Feb. 2007, DOT HS 910 712.
^{iv} CPI Inflation Calculator, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, available at https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm
^v Mayrose, James, *Influence of the Unbelted Rear-seat Passenger on Driver Mortality: “The Backseat Bullet”*, Academic Emergency Medicine, Volume 12, Issue 2. Article first published online: 28 June 2008.