



ADVOCATES
FOR HIGHWAY
& AUTO SAFETY

May 12, 2021

The Honorable Susan Deschambault, Senate Chair
The Honorable Charlotte Warren, House Chair
Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety
State House, Room 436
Augusta, Maine 04333

Dear Chairperson Deschambault and Chairperson Warren:

Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (Advocates) is an alliance of consumer, safety, law enforcement, medical and public health groups, and insurance companies working together to pass highway and auto safety laws that prevent traffic crashes, deaths and injuries, and curb related costs. We urge you to oppose the provision in Legislative Document (LD) 1479 to limit enforcement of Maine's seat belt law from primary to secondary. This action will reduce safety on Maine roads for Mainers and visitors.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reported that traffic fatalities rose across the U.S. in 2020, and lack of seat belt use has been identified as a lead contributing factor along with speeding and reckless and impaired driving. Fatalities and injuries resulting from these dangerous driving behaviors can be mitigated or prevented for vehicle occupants by buckling up. Seat belts continue to be the first line of defense for occupants when vehicles crash and other safety features, including air bags, are designed for use with a seat belted occupant.

The goal of traffic safety laws, including optimal primary enforcement seat belt laws that cover all occupants, is to deter dangerous behaviors. It is critical that vehicle occupants buckle up, and primary enforcement laws are more effective in getting people to do so.ⁱ Some states have experienced a 10-15 percent increase in seat belt use rates when primary laws were enacted.ⁱⁱ If every state with a secondary seat belt law upgraded to primary enforcement, approximately 1,000 lives and \$4 billion in crash costs could be saved every year (2005 US\$, NHTSA).ⁱⁱⁱ Proven traffic safety countermeasures should not be diminished and especially not when dangerous driving and traffic fatalities have increased.

Seat belt non-use is also costly. The NHTSA 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.^{iv} When adjusted solely for inflation, this would equate to more than \$12 billion.^v Non-use of restraints cost employers \$7.4 billion in 2018 (expressed in 2019 dollars), \$5.7 billion of which was attributed to off-the-job non-restraint use.^{vi} The average inpatient costs for crash victims who don't use seat belts are 55 percent higher than for those who use them.^{vii}

In 2019, traffic fatalities in Maine rose fifteen percent over 2018, the most recent year for which data is available from NHTSA. That year, nearly half (47 percent) of passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes in Maine were not wearing a seat belt. Thirty-one percent of all traffic fatalities (48 of 157 people) were unrestrained, according to NHTSA. Safety improvements are needed rather than the weakening of an effective, lifesaving law.

Given the proven benefits of strong and comprehensive seat belt laws, the provision in LD 1479 to weaken these laws should not be retained. Thank you for your consideration of our safety position.

Sincerely,

Catherine Chase, President

cc: Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety Members

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- i The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2010 (Revised), NHTSA, May 2015 (Revised), DOT HS 812 013.
 - ii The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2010 (Revised), NHTSA, May 2015 (Revised), DOT HS 812 013.
 - iii NHTSA, 2007. The Nation's Top Strategies to Stop Impaired Driving. Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
 - iv The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2010 (Revised), NHTSA, May 2015 (Revised), DOT HS 812 013.
 - v CPI Inflation Calculator, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm
 - vi Cost of Motor Vehicle Crashes to Employers 2019; Network of Employers for Traffic Safety, available at <https://trafficsafety.org/road-safety-resources/public-resources/cost-of-motor-vehicle-crashes-to-employers-2019/>.
 - vii Crash Outcome Data Evaluation System (CODES) Project Seat Belt and Helmet Analysis, Research Note (Revised), National Center for Statistics and Analysis, NHTSA, February 15, 1996.