



December 8, 2023

The Honorable Walter F. Timilty, Chair
The Honorable Carlos González, Chair
Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security
General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
24 Beacon Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Dear Chair Timilty and Chair González:

Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (Advocates), an alliance of consumer, safety, medical, public health and law enforcement groups and insurance companies working together to pass highway and auto safety laws that prevent crashes, save lives, reduce injuries, and contain costs, supports Senate Bill (S) 1521/House Bill (H) 2395 to upgrade Massachusetts's seat belt law to primary enforcement for all occupants. This change to the state's current seat belt requirement is a timely improvement, supported by research and experience to be a proven lifesaver.

The benefits of wearing a seat belt are well documented. From 1975 to 2019, seat belts have prevented over 403,000 fatalities and saved society approximately \$2.5 trillion in economic costs.ⁱ Seat belt use is essential to keeping occupants in their seats, for their own safety as well as their fellow passengers, and the driver retaining control of the vehicle. An unrestrained occupant can become a deadly projectile in a crash. Air bags are also designed to be effective with a properly seat belted occupant and the combination of an airbag plus a lap and shoulder belt reduces the risk of death in frontal crashes by 61 percent, compared with a 50 percent reduction for belts alone and a 34 percent reduction for airbags alone.ⁱⁱ

In frontal crashes, wearing a lap and shoulder belt reduces the risk of occupant death by 50 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ In fatal crashes in 2020, 83 percent of passenger vehicle occupants who were totally ejected from a vehicle were killed.^{iv} In 2020, only one percent of occupants reported to have been using restraints were totally ejected from a vehicle, compared with 26 percent of the unrestrained occupants.^v

Traffic crashes are not only physically and emotionally devastating, but they are also costly. Seat belt use curbs medical care costs for Massachusetts residents and the state government. Unbelted crash victims have medical bills that are 55 percent higher than belted victims, and society bears most of the cost through increased insurance premiums, taxes and health care costs.^{vi} Massachusetts incurred \$7.4 billion in economic harm, which is equivalent to \$1,072 per resident, due to motor vehicle crashes according to a 2019 analysis.^{vii} Enacting a primary enforcement all-occupant seat belt law is a crucial step towards decreasing crash-related deaths and associated costs in the state.

Seat belts are only effective when they are used, and the best way to get people to buckle up in every seating position and on every trip is by enacting comprehensive, clear and enforceable laws that require them to do so. When drivers and occupants believe that there will be a penalty for lack of seat belt use, it deters them from this dangerous behavior. Seat belt use is higher in states with primary enforcement laws compared to those with secondary enforcement laws or no seat belt use law. Some states have experienced a 10 to 15 percent increase in seat belt use rates when primary laws were enacted.^{viii} Moreover, 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 seven percent.^{ix} Currently, seat belt usage is only 77.5 percent in Massachusetts,^x significantly lower than the national average of 91.6 percent.^{xi} The seat belt use rate in Massachusetts ranked 49 of the 50 states with only New Hampshire, which has no seat belt law, ranking lower.^{xii}

This proven lifesaver is urgently needed. In 2022, an estimated 433 people were killed in traffic crashes in the state according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), a 29 percent increase since 2019.^{xiii} NHTSA data for 2021 reveal that more than 55 percent of people killed in traffic crashes in Massachusetts, when restraint use was known, were not restrained at the time of the crash.^{xiv}

A comprehensive seat belt law is vital to ensure the health and safety of Massachusetts families and visitors traveling on state roads. Advancing S 1521/H 2395 will help to meet this goal. We urge your support.

Sincerely,



Catherine Chase
President

cc: The Honorable Michael D. Brady, Vice Chair
The Honorable David Biele, Vice Chair
Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security Members

ⁱ NHTSA. 2023. The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2019 (Revised), available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813403>.

ⁱⁱ Lives Saved by Vehicle Safety Technologies and Associated Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, 1960 to 2012, Passenger Cars and LTVs, With Reviews of 26 FMVSS and the Effectiveness Of Their Associated Safety Technologies in Reducing Fatalities, Injuries, and Crashes; NHTSA, Jan. 2015, DOT HS 812 069, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812069.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lives Saved by Vehicle Safety Technologies and Associated Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, 1960 to 2012, Passenger Cars and LTVs, With Reviews of 26 FMVSS and the Effectiveness Of Their Associated Safety Technologies in Reducing Fatalities, Injuries, and Crashes; NHTSA, Jan. 2015, DOT HS 812 069, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812069.pdf>.

^{iv} Traffic Safety Facts: 2021 Data, Occupant Protection in Passenger Vehicles, NHTSA, DOT HS 813 449, May 2023, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813449>.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} State Traffic Safety Information for Massachusetts, NHTSA, available at <https://cdan.dot.gov/stsi.htm>.

^{vii} NHTSA. 2023. The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2019 (Revised), available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813403>.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} Farmer, Charles and Williams, Allen, Effect on Fatality Risk of Changing from Secondary to Primary Seat Belt Enforcement, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), 2005, available at <https://www.iihs.org/topics/bibliography/ref/1807>.

^x State Traffic Safety Information for Massachusetts, NHTSA, available at <https://cdan.dot.gov/stsi.htm>.

^{xi} Seat Belt Use in 2022 – Overall Results, NHTSA, January 2023, DOT HS 813 407, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813407>.

^{xii} Seat Belt Use in 2021 — Use Rates in the States and Territories, NHTSA, May 2022, DOT HS 813 307, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813307>.

^{xiii} Early Estimates: 2022 Traffic Crash Deaths, NHTSA, April 2023, DOT 813 HS 428, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813428>.

^{xiv} State Traffic Safety Information for Massachusetts, NHTSA, available at <https://cdan.dot.gov/stsi.htm>.