



ADVOCATES
FOR HIGHWAY
& AUTO SAFETY

January 23, 2025

The Honorable David Reid, Chair
House Highway Safety and Policy Subcommittee
Virginia House of Delegates
201 North 9th Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Chair Reid:

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 advancing House Bill (HB) 2475 to enhance the current seat belt law by including rear seat passengers. While the measure is a step in the right direction, the bill also should simplify enforcement to primary.

In 2023, an estimated 915 people were killed in traffic crashes in Virginia,ⁱ a 30 percent increase in a little under a decade.ⁱⁱ In addition, Virginia incurs approximately \$6.5 billion in economic harm annually due to motor vehicle crashes, which is equivalent to \$756 per resident each year according to a 2019 analysis.ⁱⁱⁱ When updated for inflation alone, in 2024, costs would equate to \$8.15 billion and \$948 respectively.^{iv}

In 2022, 56 percent of passenger vehicle occupants who died in Virginia were not wearing a seat belt, when restraint use was known.^v It is essential that a seat belt law covers all passengers to improve seat belt use and safety. Unbelted rear seat passengers are referred to as “back seat bullets” because they can be thrust at high 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.”^{vi} In fact, unbelted rear seat passengers are three times more likely than belted rear seat passengers to die in a crash.^{vii}

From 1975 to 2019, seat belts prevented over 403,000 fatalities and saved approximately \$2.5 trillion in economic costs.^{viii} Airbags are designed to be effective with a properly seat belted occupant. 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.^{ix} Furthermore, rear seat belt use is vital as vehicle safety infrastructure is not as developed in the rear as it is in the front.^x

A poll released by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) found that nearly 40 percent of people surveyed said they sometimes don't buckle up in the rear seat because there is no law requiring it. If such a law existed, 60 percent of respondents said it would convince them to do so.^{xi}

In addition, we urge upgrading the bill to primary enforcement for seat belts in both front and rear seats. States with primary enforcement laws have higher seat belt use rates.^{xii} While 71 percent of states with primary enforcement seat belt laws attain use rates of 90 percent or higher, only 13 percent of states with secondary enforcement laws or no seat belt law do.^{xiii} An IIHS study found that when states strengthen their laws from secondary to primary enforcement, driver death rates decline by an estimated seven percent.^{xiv}

In 2023, only 73.2 percent of Virginians buckled up, the lowest rate of any state.^{xv} Comparatively, the national average for seat belt use was 91.9 percent, and in the District of Columbia, which has a primary enforcement all-occupant law, it was 94.6 percent.^{xvi} Moreover, Virginia is going in the wrong direction. In 2019, 85.4 percent of Virginians were restrained by seat belts, but since the pandemic that number has decreased all three years for which data is available.^{xvii}

We urge the Subcommittee to take action to save lives by upgrading and advancing HB 2475.

Sincerely,

Catherine Chase, President

cc: House Highway Safety and Policy Subcommittee members

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- i Traffic Safety Facts: Crash Stats, Early Estimate of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities in 2023, NHTSA, April 2024, DOT HS 813 561, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813561>.
- ii State Traffic Safety Information for Virginia (2022), NHTSA, available at <https://cdan.dot.gov/STSI/stsi.htm>.
- iii The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2019, NHTSA, Feb. 2023, DOT HS 813 403, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813403>.
- iv CPI Inflation Calculator, BLS, Jan. 2019 to Jan. 2024, available at <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.
- v State Traffic Safety Information for Virginia (2022), NHTSA, available at <https://cdan.dot.gov/STSI/stsi.htm>.
- vi Mayrose, James, *Influence of the Unbelted Rear-seat Passenger on Driver Mortality: "The Backseat Bullet"*, Academic Emergency Medicine, Volume 12, Issue 2 available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/acem.2005.12.issue-2/issuetoc>. Article first published online: 28 June 2008.
- vii Hedlund, James, *Unbuckled in Back: An Overlooked Issue in Occupant Protection*. November, 2015. Governor's Highway Safety Association. Available at: https://www.drivingskillsforlife.com/images/pressrelease/pdf/RearBelts_FINAL.pdf.
- viii NHTSA. 2023. The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2019 (Revised), available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813403>.
- ix 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>.
- x Sahraei at al. *Reduced Protection for Belted Occupants in Rear Seats Relative to Front Seats of New Model Year Vehicles*, Proc AAAM, 2010.
- xi Status Report, Unbelted, Vol. 52 No. 5, "Adults admit they often skip belts in rear seats", IIHS. August 3, 2017.
- xii Traffic Safety Facts Research Note, Seat Belt Use in 2023—Overall Results, NHTSA, Feb. 2024, DOT HS 813 543, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/Publication/813543>.
- xiii Seat Belt Use in 2023 – Overall Results, NHTSA, August 2024, DOT HS 813 615, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813615>.
- xiv 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>.
- xv Seat Belt Use in 2023 – Overall Results, NHTSA, August 2024, DOT HS 813 615, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813615>.
- xvi Ibid.
- xvii Ibid.