



April 7, 2025

The Honorable John J. Cronin, Chair
The Honorable Daniel Cahill, Chair
Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security
General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
24 Beacon Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

Dear Chair Cronin and Chair Cahill:

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) 1699/House Bill (H) 2688 to upgrade Massachusetts's seat belt law to primary enforcement for all occupants. This change to the 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. Additionally, 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.ⁱⁱ

In frontal crashes, wearing a lap and shoulder belt reduces the risk of occupant death by 50 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ In fatal crashes in 2022, 83 percent of passenger vehicle occupants who were totally ejected from a vehicle were killed.^{iv} In 2022, 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} Additionally, Massachusetts incurs \$7.4 billion in economic harm due to motor vehicle crashes, which is equivalent to \$1,072 per resident according to a 2019 analysis.^{vii} When updated for inflation alone, in 2025, costs would equate to \$9.3 billion and \$1,353 respectively.^{viii} 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 enacting a comprehensive, clear and enforceable law will encourage people to buckle up. When drivers and occupants know 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. 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.^{ix} Some states have experienced a 10 to 15 percent increase

in seat belt use rates when primary laws were enacted.^x 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.^{xi}

Massachusetts lags in seat belt use. In 2023, seat belt use was only 80.4 percent in Massachusetts (45th out of the 50 states).^{xii} Comparatively, the national average for seat belt use was 91.9 percent, and in New York and Rhode Island, which have primary enforcement all-occupant laws, use was 94.1 percent and 89.1 percent respectively.^{xiii}

This proven lifesaver is urgently needed. In 2023, 348 people were killed in traffic crashes in Massachusetts according to an estimate from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).^{xiv} NHTSA data for 2022 reveal that 59 percent of people killed in traffic crashes in Massachusetts, when restraint use was known, were not restrained at the time of the crash.^{xv}

A comprehensive seat belt law is vital to ensure the health and safety of Massachusetts families and visitors traveling on state roads. Advancing S 1699/H 2688 will help to meet this goal. We urge your support.

Sincerely,



Catherine Chase
President

-
- 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: 2022 Data, Occupant Protection in Passenger Vehicles, NHTSA, DOT HS 813 573, May 2024, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813573>. [Occupant Protection 2022].
- v Traffic Safety Facts: 2022 Data, Occupant Protection in Passenger Vehicles, NHTSA, DOT HS 813 573, May 2024, available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813573>. [Occupant Protection 2022].
- vi 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; Available at <https://rosap.nhtl.bts.gov/view/dot/4389>.
- 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 CPI Inflation Calculator, BLS, Jan. 2019 to Jan. 2025, available at <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.
- ix 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>.
- x NHTSA. 2023. The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2019 (Revised), available at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813403>.
- xi 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>.
- xii 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>.
- 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 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>.
- xv State Traffic Safety Information for Massachusetts, NHTSA, available at <https://cdan.dot.gov/STSI/stsi.htm>.