



Testimony of

**The Honorable Jennifer Homendy
Board Member
National Transportation Safety Board**

Before the

**Joint Committee on Transportation
Connecticut General Assembly**

— On —

**House Bill 6484
An Act Concerning Recommendations by the Department of Transportation**

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An Independent Federal Agency

Good morning Chairman Lemar, and Members of the Committee. My name is Jennifer Homendy. I am honored to appear before you today, not only as a Board Member with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) but as a native of Plainville, Connecticut, to discuss the NTSB's recommendations regarding seat belt use requirements.

The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant accidents in other modes of transportation – railroad, highway, marine, and pipeline. The NTSB determines the probable cause of each accident it investigates and makes safety recommendations aimed at preventing future accidents. In addition, the NTSB carries out special studies concerning transportation safety. The recommendations that arise from our investigations and safety studies are the NTSB's most important tool for saving lives and preventing injury.

Almost 95 percent of all transportation-related deaths each year result from highway crashes. Further, motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death for children, youth, and young adults age 24 and under. The measures included in House Bill (HB) 6484 that you will consider today will help to reduce this toll.

The NTSB recommends that states require seat belt use in all seating positions in all vehicles equipped with seat belts and have been making recommendations intended to increase restraint use for decades.

The benefits of safety belt use are significant and well documented. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has estimated that lap/shoulder belts reduce the risk of fatal injury to front seat occupants of passenger cars by 45 percent, and reduce the risk of moderate to severe injuries by 50 percent.¹ Likewise, belts make a difference for rear seat passengers. In the center rear seat, lap and shoulder belts reduce the risk of fatal injury by 58 percent in cars and 75 percent in SUVs, vans, and pickups.²

Seat belts are the number one defense against motor vehicle injuries and fatalities. According to NHTSA, from 1975 through 2017, seat belts saved nearly 375,000 lives. Had all passenger vehicle occupants used seat belts in 2017, an additional 2,549 deaths could have been prevented nationwide.³

That same year, 278 vehicle occupants died in motor vehicle crashes in Connecticut; almost 40 percent of those occupants were not using seat belts. NHTSA estimates that if everyone in

¹ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), National Center for Statistics and Analysis, *Occupant Protection in Passenger Vehicles: 2018 Data. Traffic Safety Facts*, Report No. DOT HS 812 967 (Washington, DC: NHTSA, June 2020), p. 4.

² Kahane, C. J., National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), *Fatality reduction by seat belts in the center rear seat and comparison of occupants' relative fatality risk at various seating positions*, Report No. DOT HS 812 369. (Washington, DC: NHTSA, February, 2017.

³ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), National Center for Statistics and Analysis, *Occupant Protection: 2018 Data. Traffic Safety Facts*, Report No. DOT HS812 967 (Washington, DC: NHTSA, June 2020), p. 6.

Connecticut used a seat belt, rear occupants included, Connecticut would save an additional 17 lives annually.

Seat belts are the best defense against motor vehicle injuries and fatalities because they protect vehicle occupants from the extreme forces experienced during crashes. Unbelted vehicle occupants frequently injure other occupants during a crash, and unbelted drivers are less likely than belted drivers to be able to control their vehicles. Further, rear seat passengers are three times more likely to die in a crash if they are unbelted.⁴

Unfortunately, a smaller proportion of rear seat occupants use their seat belts than those riding in the front seat. As a result, many rear seat occupants are unnecessarily killed each year in motor vehicle crashes. However, the evidence indicates that states requiring rear seat belt use obtain a higher use rate than those who do not.

Research from the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) found fewer Americans are wearing seat belts when they are riding in the back seat, and that rear seat belt use rates have changed little in recent years. The GHSA estimates that rear belts are still used 10 to 15 percent less frequently than front seat belts.⁵

According to the most recent NHTSA National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS), observed seat belt use in the United States was 77.5 percent for rear seat occupants age 8 and older, compared to 90.7 percent for front seat occupants. There is ample evidence that rear seat belt use is higher in states with a law requiring use than in those states with no law. The NOPUS observations found an 84 percent rear seat belt use rate in states with a rear seat belt use law and 68 percent use in states with no law.⁶

Connecticut has been a leader on seat belt use for many years with its primary enforcement law. Its observed daytime seat belt use rate was 93.7 percent in 2019. However, Connecticut's primary seat belt law only applies to the front seat. Since 2015, the NTSB has strongly recommended a comprehensive primary enforcement seat belt law that covers all vehicle occupants in all seating positions, not just the front seat.

The NTSB recommends that states mandate the use of seat belts on all vehicles equipped with belts, including motorcoaches and other passenger vehicles. This recommendation resulted from our investigation of a 2014 crash in Davis, Oklahoma. In that crash, four college athletes were killed when they were ejected from the medium-size bus in which they were riding after it collided with a tractor trailer. None of the passengers were wearing safety belts. Our investigation concluded that the lack of restraint use by the bus passengers contributed to the severity of the injuries. Likewise, our investigation of the October 2018, crash of a stretch limousine in Schoharie, New York, in which 17 passengers in the rear of the limousine were killed had similar findings. None of the passengers were wearing a seat belt. We found that injuries to the occupants within

⁴ Governor's Highway Safety Association (GHSA), *Unbuckled in Back: An Overlooked Issue in Occupant Protection* (Washington, DC: GHSA, November 2015).

⁵ Hedlund J, *Rear Seat Belt Use: Little Change in Four Years, Much More to Do* (Washington, DC: GHSA, 2019).

⁶ Enriquez J, *Occupant Restraint Use in 2019: Results from the NOPUS Controlled Intersection Study*, Report No. DOT HS 812 992 (Washington, DC: NHTSA, October 2020).

the passenger compartment might have been mitigated by a combination of adequate seat integrity, well-designed passenger lap/shoulder belts and proper seat belt use. We urge that this important expansion of your seat belt law be applied to passenger vehicles of all sizes.

The NTSB believes that a significant number of lives can be saved, and injuries prevented if Connecticut closes the loophole in its occupant restraint law. The NTSB therefore strongly supports expanding the current seat belt use law to cover all seating positions in all vehicles. This lifesaving measure will improve safety for the people of Connecticut.

Thank you again for providing the NTSB an opportunity to testify on these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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