

Secretary Ray LaHood
Holding Firm against Distracted Driving
Remarks as Prepared for Delivery
Wednesday, July 7, 2010

Good morning. Welcome to DOT. Thank you for joining us.

As you know, we've been on a rampage against distracted driving for more than a year – encouraging drivers to put down their cell phones and concentrate on the road. We're here today to affirm – loud and clear – that we're keeping the pedal to the metal, in spite of a new effort to rile up the electronics industry and derail our coalition.

In a moment, you'll hear from several of our allies in the safety community. Jim Hall, former Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, will talk about his opposition to this new lobbying effort and support for our anti-distracted driving campaign – despite media reports to the contrary. Janet Froetscher, President and CEO of the National Safety Council, Vernon Betkey, Chairman of the Governors Highway Safety Association, and Jennifer Smith, President and founder of FocusDriven, will discuss the importance of stopping distracted driving by continuing to raise awareness, enact tough laws, and improve enforcement.

But, first, I want to address the counter-efforts directly – and to make sure everyone understands, unequivocally, that DOT will hold firm when it comes to safety.

The simple fact is that texting and talking behind the wheel is a deadly epidemic. Let's not forget why we began this campaign: During 2008 alone, distracted driving-related crashes caused nearly 6,000 deaths and more than half-a-million injuries, each of them completely avoidable.

The victims aren't just statistics. They're parents who lost children. They're children, like Jennifer Smith, who lost parents.

You see it every day: Drivers swerving in their lanes, stopping at green lights, running red ones, or narrowly missing a pedestrian because they have their eyes and minds on their phone, not the road. Yet, people consistently assume that they can both drive and text or talk at the same time.

This is not to say that if a driver eats his hamburger or applies her makeup behind the wheel, it's any safer. But most of us know these are boneheaded things to try. And they don't occur with nearly the same frequency as texting and talking in the driver's seat.

Now, together, we're making significant strides toward tackling the crisis. We held a national distracted driving summit in Washington that brought together law enforcement, industry representatives, researchers, legislators, and victims. More than 300 people attended – and more than 30,000 participated over the internet.

President Obama signed an Executive Order prohibiting federal employees from texting while driving on government business – and from using government-issued electronics while driving their private cars.

We banned commercial truck and bus drivers from text messaging on the job.

We provided state governments with sample legislation outlawing texting while driving. Thirty have done so. More will follow suit soon.

We launched pilot programs in Hartford, Connecticut, and Syracuse, New York, which test whether high visibility enforcement and public service announcements change drivers' minds and actions. Called *Phone in One Hand. Ticket in the Other*, these programs will ultimately serve as a model for other cities working to make their roadways safer. During the pilot's first week, Hartford police cited more than 2,000 drivers for talking on cell phones – and 200 more for texting while driving. That's in just one city – in just seven days.

And since distracted driving is a challenge around the world, not just in the United States, we've issued a global call to end it. Jennifer and I stood with United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon this past May as he issued a new directive that forbids more than 40,000 U.N. employees from texting while driving on the job.

Of course, this new lobbying effort – led by Seward Square Group and others – jeopardizes the progress we've made by undermining our message about public safety. It's dangerous – designed to deflect attention away from texting and talking behind the wheel, the most risky types of distracted driving. And it's just plain wrong.

Everyone on this stage has devoted themselves to stopping distracted driving because we know our efforts are preventing unnecessary accidents and tragic deaths.

So, our message is straightforward: Those who care about safety will join our effort, not undercut it. Thousands of lives are at stake.

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