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Fourth Anniversary of Motorcoach Crash that Killed and Injured Bluffton University Baseball Team Members Marks Introduction of Legislation to Correct Dangerous and Unaddressed Safety Problems

Washington, D.C. (March 2, 2011)—On the fourth anniversary of the crash that killed seven and injured 28 others when a motorcoach carrying the Bluffton University baseball team plunged off a highway ramp on I-75 in Atlanta, GA, U.S. Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) will introduce the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act (MESA). In the House, Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) will introduce a companion bill.

In 2010, the bi-partisan MESA bill was passed by the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee but failed to be debated by the full Senate because of opposition from the motorcoach industry. Now reintroduced in the 112th Congress, the bill would address the lack of basic safety requirements to protect motorcoach occupants and keep unsafe operators off the nation's highways.

John Betts, of Bryan, Ohio, whose son was one of the seven killed in the 2007 Bluffton University motorcoach crash stated: "The Betts family is grateful for the leadership of Senators Brown and Hutchison and Representative John Lewis in proposing this essential lifesaving legislation. Passage is long overdue. Since my son died there have been hundreds of motorcoach crashes and fires, thousands of injuries and far too many deaths. Families continue to bury their loved ones and passengers suffer permanent disabling injuries in motorcoach crashes that could be prevented if this bill were passed and implemented. The opposition of the motorcoach industry is unacceptable and unreasonable in light of the annual death and injury toll."

"Four years ago, the families, teammates, and community of Bluffton University lost their loved ones in a terrible crash on I-75 in Atlanta. Since that day our thoughts and prayers have not ceased for the victims of this tragedy and for others who are suffering through the loss of their family members in bus accidents," said U.S. Representative John Lewis (D-GA). "We need these regulations so that all passengers can ride buses and other motorcoaches in comfort and complete safety. Last year, we came so close to passing this common-sense, bipartisan legislation. This year, I hope the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act will become law."

Yen-Chi Le, of Houston, Texas, whose mother, Catherine Tuong Lam, was killed with 16 others in a motorcoach crash in Sherman, Texas on August 8, 2008 that also seriously injured 38 people, said: "It saddens my heart that we have reached the fourth anniversary of the Bluffton University crash and basic safety protections are still not available as standard equipment on every motorcoach. How many more crashes must occur or lives be ruined? As motorcoach travel becomes more common due to rising fuel costs, the safety for traveling passengers is of paramount importance. Families of those killed in motorcoach crashes fully support the sponsors of the bill and implore other Members to get on board with MESA."

Each year, more than 750 million passenger trips are made on motorcoaches, exceeding the number of trips taken on commercial airlines. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration more than 7,800 people are injured and about 20 are killed in motorcoach crashes each year (1999 to 2008). In rollover crashes, nearly three-quarters of the passengers who are killed are ejected.

For over 40 years, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has investigated fatal motorcoach crashes and concluded that the lack of occupant protection features contributes to the severity of crashes. Numerous recommendations to upgrade occupant protection and strengthen operational safety have languished or been ignored by the U.S. Department of Transportation. For example, in 1968 the NTSB first recommended that motorcoaches be equipped with seat belts. Since 1994, lap and shoulder seat belts have been required on all newly-manufactured motorcoaches in Australia.

“This legislation ensures action to install critically important safety technologies throughout the motorcoach fleet that NTSB investigations have found lacking and contributing to the death and injury toll in crash after crash,” said Jackie Gillan, Vice President of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. “This bill sets a reasonable timetable for U.S. DOT to implement NTSB recommendations to provide maximum safety benefits to motorcoach passengers for decades to come.”

Reasonable deadlines are set in the bill requiring DOT to issue overdue safety standards protecting passengers in motorcoach crashes by using available technologies. When enacted, it will require occupant protection measures (seat belts, roof strength and anti-ejection windows), protection against on-board fires (fire fighting equipment and fire suppression), and crash avoidance systems (electronic stability control and tire pressure monitoring). The legislation also addresses the safe operation of motorcoach companies through new entrant safety reviews, and improved driver safety by requiring entry-level driver training and electronic on-board recorders to ensure compliance with federal rules on maximum driving time.

Other motorcoach crash victims’ families expressed strong support for the legislation. “We believe that had the common sense provisions in this bill been in place before March 29, 2006, our daughters would have been saved from the catastrophic injuries and deaths they suffered on that day,” said Brad Brown and Steve Forman of the West Brook Bus Crash Families, whose daughters were involved in a serious motorcoach crash in Devers, Texas in 2006. “Safety belts at each seat, improved roof crush standards and the protection of anti-ejection advanced window glazing would have kept each of these girls safe in their seats. Why shouldn’t motorcoach passengers expect the same protection now required in our own automobiles? We look forward to the passage of this important long-awaited legislation.”

The bipartisan legislation is strongly supported by a broad range of consumer, health and safety organizations including Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (Advocates), the American Association of Classified School Employees, Consumer Federation of America, KIDS AND CARS.ORG, as well as by parents and family members from across the country that have needlessly lost their children and relatives in motorcoach crashes.

John Betts of Bryan, OH, whose son was a member of the Bluffton University baseball team killed in the 2007 crash in Atlanta, GA, can be reached at 419-304-0388. Yen-Chi Le, whose mother was killed in the Sherman, TX bus crash in August 2008, can be reached at 713-500-9622. Brad Brown, whose daughter was a member of the West Brook High School soccer team killed in the 2006 Devers, TX crash, can be reached at 409-351-4208. Steve Forman, whose daughter was in the same crash, can be reached at 409-656-5263.

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