

Statement of Karin Mongeon, Highway Safety Division Director,
North Dakota Department of Transportation
before the
Subcommittee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate
regarding
*Understanding Roadway Safety: Examining the Causes of Roadway Safety
Challenges and Possible Interventions*
November 7, 2023

Chairman Kelly, Ranking Member Cramer, and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Karin Mongeon, Highway Safety Division Director with the North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT). The Highway Safety Division serves as the State Highway Safety Office (SHSO) for the state of North Dakota. SHSOs are experts in highway safety with an emphasis on behavioral highway safety programs.

I am here today on behalf of NDDOT Director Ron Henke. Director Henke wishes to express the appreciation of the NDDOT for Senator Cramer's work on transportation issues leading to policy that has positively benefited the state of North Dakota. And also, for the invitation to appear before this committee today to discuss highway safety, particularly including the successes of North Dakota's statewide Vision Zero initiative, with the goal to reduce motor vehicle crash fatalities and serious injuries to zero. Thank you, Senator Cramer.

Today, I will offer some comments, from my perspective as a SHSO Director, on the challenges to highway safety in a rural state and how we address those challenges. My experience extends from more than 25 years of public health and safety program administration, with more than 15 years in highway safety.

North Dakota's Vision Zero Initiative and Recent Successes

In January 2018, the NDDOT, several other North Dakota Cabinet-level agencies, and other partners launched North Dakota's Vision Zero (Vision Zero. Zero Fatalities. Zero Excuses.) initiative to reduce motor vehicle crash fatalities and serious injuries on North Dakota roads to zero. North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum and his office championed North Dakota's Vision Zero initiative and have been strong supporters of the initiative since its launch.

After the height of oil activity in North Dakota, in 2012, North Dakota began to experience a decreasing trend in motor vehicle crash fatalities and fatality rates (per 100 million vehicle miles traveled [VMT]) due to lower traffic volumes and reductions in VMT. With North Dakota's lower number of fatalities, it became even more challenging to continue to reduce fatalities.

The conception and implementation of Vision Zero was an opportunity for North Dakota to reinvigorate highway safety efforts, to bring new appeal and public awareness to solving highway safety problems, and to continue to advance the decreasing fatality trend. At the time, the NDDOT was in the midst of an update to its Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP), which became our first Vision Zero Plan, and the updated plan (for the five-year period 2018-2023) coincided with the launch of Vision Zero.

Crash deaths in North Dakota are largely attributed to the following areas identified as priorities in the SHSP/Vision Zero Plan.

- ***Unbelted Occupants.*** Each year, between 50-65 percent of fatalities (where seat belts apply) are unbelted at the time of the crash.
- ***Lane Departure Crashes.*** About half of lane departure crashes occur on local roads. These crashes often severe because they occur at higher rates of speed resulting in single vehicle roll overs, side swipe and head on crashes.
- ***Local Roadways.*** In North Dakota, over 40 percent of fatalities and 48 percent of serious injuries occur on local system roadways, despite local roadways only accounting for 18 percent of the traffic volumes in the state.
- ***Speed/Aggressive Driving.*** Speed/aggressive driving is a factor in 35-45 percent of fatal crashes annually.
- ***Impaired Driving.*** Alcohol is a factor in 35-40 percent of fatal crashes annually.

The NDDOT administers the Vision Zero initiative while simultaneously meeting the federal requirements of the SHSP. The SHSP identifies priority highway safety problems based on data and research-based strategies to address the problems. Vision Zero strategies include but are not limited to: (1) widespread public education/outreach, (2) law changes to ensure state laws represent best practices in traffic safety; (3) workplace policies that support driver and passenger safety, (4) infrastructure/road safety improvements, (5) technology advancements that make vehicles, roads and drivers safer; and (6) high visibility enforcement of existing traffic laws.

Safety is a primary consideration in everything we do at the NDDOT. It is our mission to Safely Move People and Goods. To achieve our mission and ensure our work in transportation safety is meeting the needs of North Dakota citizens, we provide many opportunities for meaningful public participation and engagement as we work to develop, implement, and evaluate our transportation safety programs, both infrastructure and behavioral.

The NDDOT is able to coordinate safety planning and work easily across internal Divisions. The Highway Safety, Programming, Planning/Asset Management and Local Government Divisions meet regularly to coordinate transportation safety planning, strategy implementation and project/program outcomes. This ease in coordination extends to meeting certain federal requirements such as identifying annual safety performance targets and reporting progress toward targets.

Coordination with stakeholders occurs through the stakeholder structure for SHSP/Vision Zero Plan implementation which includes a Vision Zero Executive Leadership team comprised of agency executives from 10 state agencies, the North Dakota Association of Counties, and the North Dakota League of Cities. The Vision Zero Steering Committee is comprised of managers from these same agencies and also includes industry representation from safety, agriculture, energy, law enforcement, emergency medical services, and victim advocates. Vision Zero Priority Emphasis Area Teams comprised of Vision Zero partners with expertise in each priority area work to implement the strategies within the SHSP/Vision Zero Plan.

There are also many other opportunities for partners and the public to engage in transportation safety planning and offer feedback through community outreach events, public meetings, public comment periods, and periodic survey opportunities. We are committed to very wide outreach, to all communities.

Due to a strong SHSP/Vision Zero Plan and vigorous strategy implementation by stakeholders, North Dakota reported 98 crash deaths at the end of calendar year 2022. This is the lowest number of crash deaths in North Dakota in about 20 years.

Vision Zero strategies that contributed to this 20-year low in fatalities include infrastructure strategies funded through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP), federal discretionary grants, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) formula funding, behavioral strategies funded through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Highway Safety Program (HSP), and special funds contributed by the state of North Dakota.

The NDDOT plans carefully for the use of these funds and spends them well (in compliance with federal regulation, with consideration to evidence, and in amounts and locations driven by data), which is also a factor in our success. For example, funding that improved safety was awarded to the NDDOT through the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant program.

The grant was for a Tribal Safety Project that addresses safety concerns of both the Standing Rock Indian Reservation and the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation by improving safety for pedestrians and vehicles traveling in busy areas near schools, workplaces, and homes.

Other examples of efficient and effective spending to advance highway safety include the following.

Infrastructure Strategies

Focusing on proven safety countermeasures, the infrastructure safety strategies implemented through the Highway Safety Improvement Program and other federal formula funding sources include:

- Constructing roundabout intersections

- Constructing high-tension median cable guardrail on the Interstate system.
- Constructing pedestrian improvements throughout the state, including rapid rectangular flashing beacons, enhanced signing and crosswalks, and leading pedestrian intervals.
- Implementing road diets.
- Installing roadway lighting.
- Installing passing lanes and turn lanes on major freight corridors.
- Completing low-cost systemic projects on the state highway system, including enhanced intersection signing and pavement marking, curve signing, and intersection destination lighting.

In addition to items listed above, the NDDOT is unique in that we have by policy installed statewide edge and centerline rumble strips on the entire rural state highway system for over 13 years. The NDDOT is also one of the few states that funded and facilitated the development of Local Road Safety Plans for all 53 counties, 12 major cities, and 4 tribes in the state. These safety plans included specific project submittals and resulted in the completion of many low-cost systemic safety measures throughout counties, cities, and reservations. The NDDOT prioritized HSIP funding to construct these projects.

The NDDOT began to design and implement Vision Zero Highway Safety Corridors (HSCs) in 2019. HSCs are an innovative strategy where highway segments are selected based on data for low-cost infrastructure safety solutions, heightened driver education, and heightened law enforcement. Motorists driving through the HSCs see enhanced signing and pavement marking and law enforcement presence. Coordinated media and outreach activity educates the public about what they can expect as they travel through the HSCs.

As we continue to develop more of the above listed projects, we are also installing our first reduced conflict intersections next year, several Interstate system locations will have wrong way detection systems installed, and we will be upgrading state system edge and centerline pavement marking to wider lines.

Traffic growth creates demands for improved transportation facilities capable of handling the increase in vehicular traffic, especially when trucks make up a high percentage. This mix of traffic types on two-lane highways can result in drivers engaging in risk-taking behavior to maneuver around slower moving vehicles. One such example of this in North Dakota is US Highway 85, a critical corridor connecting Interstate 94 to the heart of oil production in our state. Although crash data may not always directly support the need for adding capacity, public perception and user experiences highlight and heighten the need for a safer roadway. Crash data only accounts for reported crashes and does not consider unreported crashes or near misses. Adding capacity can have benefits in creating a safer experience for perceived driver safety and comfort. And those projects can include features that enhance safety, such as turn lanes, passing lanes and geometric enhancements.

Similarly, we consider truck parking investments and their safety benefits as we review rest stops and any needs to invest in improving them. Again, safety is part of everything we do.

Behavioral Strategies

The NDDOT Highway Safety Division develops and implements the behavioral safety programs applied through Vision Zero. Behavioral strategies include, but are not limited to:

- Sustained high visibility enforcement for impaired driving, occupant protection, distracted driving and speed with coordinated media. High Visibility Enforcement (HVE) is delivered in partnership with many participating city and county law enforcement agencies and the North Dakota Highway Patrol (NDHP).
- A year-round media and outreach plan focusing on priorities within the Vision Zero Plan.

Outreach highlights include:

- Vision Zero Schools provide for student leaders to conduct peer-to-peer education within the school and community to establish a culture of traffic safety. Other programs specific to teen drivers include Impact Teen Drivers, annual Driving Skills for Success events, the North Dakota Safety Council's Alive at 25 Program, and Early Warning Letters to teens who are in a crash or receive a citation.
- ND Sober Ride is a program administered through the NDDOT that provides discounted sober rides to those who have consumed alcohol and/or drugs. ND Sober Ride is made available during holidays as well as community events throughout the year where alcohol consumption is expected.
- Buckle Up. Phone Down. is a program that focuses on the critical issues of seat belt use and distracted driving prevention. Participants are encouraged to sign a pledge to always wear a seat belt and never drive distracted. Partner agencies are encouraged to implement policies that require seat belt use and ban distracted driving.

The NDDOT has a contract with the North Dakota Association of Counties to employ Vision Zero Community Outreach Coordinators at the county level who serve multi-county regions. The Coordinators serve as subject matter experts and liaisons with public and private sector partners to advance Vision Zero strategies locally within their service regions. Coordinators are responsible for providing public information and education, planning, and conducting outreach events, implementing strategies within the Vision Zero Plan, engaging in media advocacy, providing partner training and other activities.

One of the greatest achievements of Vision Zero occurred very recently when a group of Vision Zero stakeholders were successful in working with the North Dakota Legislature to pass a Primary Seat Belt Law (PBL) that went into effect August 1, 2023. This was a very challenging task that took years of education, persistence, and collaboration from the many Vision Zero stakeholders. A PBL will increase North Dakota's seat belt use over time and save lives.

The Future of North Dakota Vision Zero

The NDDOT recently worked to update the SHSP/Vision Zero Plan for the next five years (2024-2028).

The update focuses on that fact that there is no single solution to the problem of motor vehicle crash fatalities. It takes a comprehensive approach including education/outreach, enforcement, engineering, post-crash care, and more. The update also focuses on stakeholder engagement and incorporation of the Safe System Approach, consistent with the US DOT's National Roadway Safety Strategy. The Safe System Approach aims to protect all roadway users and has been proven to substantially reduce fatalities and serious injuries. The foundation of a Safe System is built upon a strong safety culture for all users and communities.

The plan update also identifies additional opportunities to advance Vision Zero in areas where focus has been lesser, such as distracted driving, safer vehicles, and post-crash care. The plan also emphasizes vulnerable road users, including pedestrians and bicyclists, based on data and consistency with the Vulnerable Road User (VRU) special rule under 23 USC 148. The NDDOT completed its first VRU assessment this month.

Lastly, we are always alert for input to inform our efforts. We are Members of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and participated in AASHTO's Safety Summit three weeks ago, which renewed state DOTs' collective commitment to a transportation system that is free of fatalities and serious injuries. This key event called for an AASHTO Safety Action Plan focused on sharing notable and innovative tools, methods, and other resources to assist states and others in their work to improve highway and transportation safety throughout the project lifecycle. We also belong to the Governor's Highway Safety Association and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, and also learn from our participation in those organizations. But, most importantly, we are always engaged with people and organizations in North Dakota to learn how to improve safety in the state.

Conclusion

That concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman, and I thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear today. I'll be pleased to respond to questions at the appropriate time.
