



**House Committee on Transportation
Highway Safety Bill: Primary Seat Belts
January 17, 2018**

Chairman Brennan, and distinguished members of the House Transportation Committee. My name is Dan Goodman and I am the manager of public affairs for AAA Northern New England. On behalf of AAA Northern New England, which serves more than 156,000 members in the state of Vermont, I am here to support the a primary seat belt law in Vermont.

AAA actively advocates for public policy that makes Vermont a safer place to live, work, and raise our families. AAA is committed to protecting the law that has proven effective at reducing fatalities, injuries and the overall costs associated with automobile crashes.

The simplest and most effective way to prevent injury and death is by bucking up. Traffic deaths are rising across the country, including Vermont which saw the largest number of fatalities in 2017 (69) since 2013. Nationally more than 40,000 people died in automobile crashes in 2016, a six percent increase form 2015, (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration). Of the 35,092 people killed in motor vehicle crashes in 2015, 48 percent were not wearing seat belts. In 2015 alone, seat belts saved an estimated 13,941 lives and could have saved an additional 2,814 people if they had been wearing seat belts, (NHTSA).

As crashes and fatalities rise in the State, seat belt use is also declining. Over the last five years Vermont has seen a decrease in seat belt usage while the national average is increasing. Since 2010 Vermont has experienced a 6.1% decrease in seat belt use compared to a 5.8% increase nationwide.

Primary enforcement seat belt laws have a proven track record of increasing a State's seat belt use rate. It's estimated that if Vermont passed a primary seat belt law belt usage could increase by 8 percentage points, which could have save 3 lives and prevented 15 serious injuries (NHTSA).

Wearing seat belts is not just a personal choice that only affects the individual. Motor vehicle injuries and fatalities have a significant societal cost. In 2010, the economic costs due to motor vehicle crashes in the U.S. was \$277 billion, which equates to \$979 for every resident of Vermont, each year and about 75 percent of the costs are paid by citizens not involved in the crashes. In a 1996 study, NHTSA found that the average inpatient cost for unbelted crash victims was 55 percent higher than for belted crash victims.

Seat belts are designed to retain people in their seats, and to prevent or reduce injuries suffered in a crash. In less time than it takes for a human being to blink an eye, the seat belt system goes into action to control the energy load the occupant endures on impact. Worn properly, safety belts are designed to spread crash forces across the stronger bony parts of the upper body. They ensure that as

little contact is made between the occupant and vehicle interior as possible and significantly reduce the risk of being thrown from a vehicle.

Seat belts are designed to work as the key part of wider injury prevention measures and safety systems, such as airbags and head restraints, which will not be as effective in reducing the risk of injury if an occupant is not wearing a seat belt.

Relative to occupants who are not ejected from vehicles, occupants who are ejected in non-rollover crashes are nearly twice as likely to die, and those who are ejected in rollover crashes are 4 times more likely to die, (NHTSA).

Lack of seatbelt use, drugged driving, distracted driving and speeding are the main factors for the increase in fatalities. It is clear, both at the state and national level that seat belts save lives. Research shows that seat belt usage will increase, thus saving lives and decreasing disability from accidents where seat belts are not in use. Passing a primary seat belt law sends a clear message to drivers that Vermont takes seat belt use very seriously.

Examples of States who have implemented a primary seat belt law:

Utah's Seat Belt Use Rate Increases 4.5%, September 2016

Utah's primary seat belt law went into effect in May of 2015. According to a press [release](#) from the Department of Public Safety, the results from Utah's annual seat belt observational survey showed an increase of 4.5% since the primary law took effect, for an overall usage rate of 87.9%. The survey shows progress is being made in getting motorists to buckle up, but there is still work to be done to get all Utahans to buckle up.

<https://highwaysafety.utah.gov/2016/09/12/2016-seat-belt-survey-results-and-september-click-it-or-ticket-campaign/>

A comparative policy analysis of seat belt laws - Report June 2014

States that strengthened their seat belt policies and made the transition from secondary to primary laws have seen increases in seat belt usage and reductions in fatalities and injuries. A 2005 review of passenger vehicle deaths in states that changed from secondary to primary enforcement seat belt laws found annual fatality rates were reduced by 7% (Farmer & Williams, 2005). Specifically, in Michigan seat belt use rates increased by 13% after primary enforcement was implemented, and use rates remained 10% higher than before transition one year later (Eby, Vivoda, & Fordyce, 2002). California saw a decrease of 1200 motor vehicle crash injuries per month after changing from secondary to primary enforcement of their seat belt law (Houston & Richardson Jr, 2002). A contributing factor to the difference in seat belt use rates under primary and secondary laws may be differences in enforcement. Police are sometimes reluctant to aggressively ticket for seat belt violations, either because they don't view it as a serious offense or because they feel it is a matter of personal choice. Strong enforcement can solidify public and political support (Williams & Wells, 2004).

https://www.iowadot.gov/research/reports/Year/2014/fullreports/Ulowa_SeatBeltPolicyAnalysis_FinalReport.pdf

Impact of Implementing a Primary Enforcement Seat Belt Law in Florida: A Case Study, August 2012

On June 30, 2009, Florida implemented a primary seat belt law. The new primary law provided an additional gain of 4.3 percentage points in statewide usage to 85.2%. Belt use increased the most among the lowest belt use groups, including males, the African-American population, pickup truck occupants, younger occupants, and motorists on local roads. Statewide belt usage increased to 87.4% after the 2010 CIOT, about one full year after the primary belt law went into effect.

<https://www.nhtsa.gov/staticfiles/nti/pdf/811656.pdf>

Impacts of Minnesota's Primary Seat Belt Law, March 2012

This study estimates that there have been 68 - 92 fewer fatalities from motor vehicle crashes, and 320 - 550 fewer serious injuries since the primary seat belt law went into effect. This improved safety record translates into at least \$45 million in avoided hospital charges, including a direct savings of nearly \$10 million or more tax dollars that would have paid for expenses charged to government insurers. The primary seat belt law has enjoyed the support of over 70% of all Minnesotans and observed use of seat belts statewide has risen from 86.7% in 2008 to an all-time high of 92.7% in 2011

<https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ots/seat-belts-air-bags/documents/dps-eval-primary-seat-belt-law.pdf>

Evaluation of Maine's Seat Belt Law Change From Secondary to Primary Enforcement, April 2010

Maine upgraded its seat belt law to primary enforcement on September 20, 2007. Both daytime and nighttime observed belt use increased in the months following implementation of the law (daytime 77% to 84%; night 69% to 81%). Although daytime belt use was generally higher, nighttime belt use showed a greater increase than daytime belt use. Awareness surveys indicated that Maine motorists were clearly aware of the law change and its consequences.

<https://www.nhtsa.gov/sites/nhtsa.dot.gov/files/documents/811259.pdf>

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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