



Proponent Testimony in Support of HB 536
Ohio House Criminal Justice Committee
Lieutenant Colonel Joshua Swindell – Assistant Superintendent

Chairwoman Abrams, Vice-Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of House Bill 536 which would make Ohio's safety belt law a primary offense. I am Lieutenant Colonel Joshua Swindell, Assistant Superintendent of the Ohio State Highway Patrol.

Historical Perspective

Traffic crashes in Ohio have decreased 33% in the last 49 years, from 1974-2023. The highest number of crashes during this time frame was 433,614 in 1978, and the fewest number of crashes, which were 245,829, occurred in 2020. Last year, there were 252,627 reported crashes in Ohio.

Overall, traffic fatalities in Ohio have decreased 48% over the last 87 years, from 1936-2023. The highest number of fatalities during this time frame, which were 2,778, occurred in 1969 while the lowest number of fatalities at 990, happened in 2013.

Several key factors have influenced these positive safety trends including: improved engineering, vehicle safety enhancements, enforcement of laws, education of drivers and action by the Ohio General Assembly.

Safety Improvements

Ohio spends billions of dollars each year to improve road conditions and integrate features that keep motorists safe, from rumble strips to alert someone driving out of their lane, to newly designed intersections that decrease collision potential. Unfortunately, none of these things matter if your vehicle leaves the roadway. In the last five years, 19% of fatal and serious injury crashes included one or more vehicles leaving the roadway.

Similarly, automotive companies have invested billions of dollars to increase occupant safety within their vehicles. These items include crumple zones, airbags, head restraints and safety belts to name a few. However, the effectiveness of these features is severely limited when a driver or passenger is thrown from their seat. In the last five years, 2,554 or 61% of people killed in traffic crashes were not wearing an available safety belt. Of these, 771 occupants, or nearly one in three occupants involved in a fatal crash were fully or partially ejected from their vehicle.

Education & Enforcement

State troopers work tirelessly each day to improve safety on Ohio's roads by enforcing traffic laws and educating the public.

Sometimes that education is by the motorist receiving a ticket, other times it can be achieved with a warning. But every time, it is about positively influencing and changing driving behavior.

The Patrol's efforts for educational outreach extend beyond traffic stops.

Since 2019, 420 individuals have been recognized by the Patrol's "Saved by the Belt" award. This program recognizes drivers who were saved from sustaining life-threatening injuries by their decisions to wear safety belts.

The Patrol's *DRIVE to Live* Program, that started in 2021, is a way through which state troopers talk directly to teens about safe driving behaviors, including the importance of safety belt usage. In the three years of the program's existence more than 36,000 youth have been impacted.

Legislative Action

Earlier this year, the Ohio Department of Public Safety, through the Ohio Traffic Safety Council, convened a task force with the objective of saving lives by increasing safety belt compliance. Recommendations from that task force include tangible things that can be done to increase safety belt usage and save lives in Ohio. The primary recommended action from the Ohio Safety Belt Task Force final report was a primary safety belt law, because that represents the most effective way of saving lives.

In 2022, which is the most recent year for which national traffic fatality data is available, Ohio had the 8th most traffic fatalities of any state in the country, with 1,275 deaths. According to 2022 safety belt data, Ohio ranked 24th in unrestrained traffic fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. Of the 23 states with a lower fatality rate, 20 had a primary safety belt law.

The Ohio General Assembly has acted many times to enhance traffic safety, from the enactment of Ohio's current safety belt law in 1986 to the many evolutions of our impaired driving laws. We must also not look past what was accomplished last year. Preliminary data suggests that distracted driving crashes fell 16% during the first three months following the distracted driving law becoming a primary offense, compared to the previous year. Data also showed an 8.1% overall reduction in hand-held cell phone usage since the passage of the new distracted driving law.

As I stand before you today, there have been 10% fewer fatal crashes in Ohio as compared to this time last year. We know your work on the distracted driving law has positively influenced driving behavior and saved lives.

Why the law needs to be changed

During the last five years, 6,258 people have been killed and another 37,702 people have been seriously injured in motor vehicle crashes on Ohio's roads. A common theme in these crashes is the lack of safety belt usage. But, statistics don't tell the story of the reality of these situations. These individuals are fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, friends and co-workers.

With your help we have made significant strides improving road safety in Ohio. With your continued support we can further protect the lives of Ohioans on our roadways.

Chairwoman Abrams, Vice-Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. I encourage you to support House Bill 536 which will undoubtedly save countless lives on Ohio's roadways.

I am available to answer any questions at this time.