

Senate Bill 2121
House Transportation Committee
Representative Ruby, Chairman
March 18, 2021

Chairman Ruby and members of the House Transportation Committee, my name is Christa Kovarik and I am a trooper with the North Dakota Highway Patrol. Please accept this statement in support of Senate Bill 2121.

I have been a trooper with the patrol for nearly 18 years and have been a crash reconstructionist for 13 years. While in high school, I did not like physics and even wanted to drop out. Many years later, I admit I love the study of physics because physics tell the story of a vehicle crash. Newton's Law states that a body in motion stays in motion until another action acts upon it. Relating that to a crash, think of traveling down I-94, at 75 mph. How fast are you going? 75. As it happens in North Dakota, a deer jumps out in front of you, your reaction is to forcefully apply the brakes; your body wants to continue to travel at 75 mph—which would mean forward motion into the steering wheel and then through the windshield. What stops your body from staying in motion? Your seatbelt.

If you are on a road with a lower speed limit and you are going 25 mph because you're driving in town, you may think, "*I don't need to wear my seatbelt in town, the speed limit is only 25 mph*". I investigated a crash where a teenage driver rear-ended a vehicle on main street. The driver was traveling 25 mph and declined medical assistance. She was sitting in my patrol car as I was getting information for a report, she kept rubbing her chest. I commented to her that she must not have been wearing her seat belt, she responded, "*No, how could you tell?*" She told me she didn't think at 25 mph she needed to wear her seatbelt and would not get hurt if she was involved in a crash. I asked if she still believed that to be true, and she responded no and admitted that without it, she flew forward and hit the steering wheel and was in pain.

In addition to keeping your body from forward motion in a crash, a seatbelt also keeps you inside the vehicle. One of the most common crashes in North Dakota is a one vehicle rollover. In fact, there have been 5,366 one vehicle rollovers in the past five

years, 177 of them fatal crashes. I have covered numerous single vehicle rollovers in my career; the reason these crashes most often are fatal is due to the person failing to remain in the safety zone of the vehicle. The advances in vehicle technologies today provide many safety features to keep occupants safe; the safety features are designed to work together, but if you don't stay in the vehicle, these features are useless. In a vehicle rollover, the occupant may remain in the vehicle for a full revolution; however, if the occupant is unrestrained, the person will be thrown around inside the vehicle. As the vehicle continues to roll, the windows give way and the occupant becomes a projectile and is forcefully thrown from the vehicle, eventually landing with their body hitting the ground, distorted, and with serious or fatal injuries. Another possibility is to be partially ejected and an arm or leg or other body part can get crushed under the vehicle as it rolls, or worse, the vehicle lands on them. In a personal experience from 2017, a group of young football players were coming home from a game; the driver got distracted and lost control of the vehicle. All occupants were not wearing seatbelts, were ejected and one died and the others severely injured. The vehicle compartment was completely intact after the crash, and had the three worn their seat belts, they would have remained in the vehicle and may have walked away with minor injuries. Often times people will argue that they do not want to wear a seatbelt in case they end up getting into a crash where they are submerged in water or the vehicle is on fire. Less than one-half of one percent of all injury crashes involve being submerged in water or engulfed in flames. Plus, if you are unrestrained in a crash, the likelihood of having an incapacitating injury that prevents you from being able to get out quickly is much higher.

The highway patrol works hard to provide a safe and secure environment and we rarely know the results of our prevention efforts, I want to share a story with a positive outcome because of seat belts. A motorist, driving a Honda Fit, was traveling north on Highway 83; the driver fell asleep and started to drift into the median. The vehicle traveled through the median, vaulted off a median crossover, became airborne and then rolled end to end. Both the driver and passenger had to be extricated, because both were wearing their seatbelts, they only sustained minor, non-debilitating injuries. There are photos of this crash following my remarks.

In conclusion, over nearly 18 years with the North Dakota Highway Patrol, I have seen many crashes; including fatal crashes or crashes where someone is paralyzed because they were ejected. In the vast majority of these crashes, if the motorist would have been wearing their seat belt at the time of the crash, they would have remained in the car or remained safely in their seat and they would be alive today, or in the case of those paralyzed, be walking today. I have also seen many 'wonder' crashes in my career: the crashes where I wonder how the occupants survived, how a vehicle is so mangled yet the driver compartment is intact and the driver survived, the answer: they were wearing a seatbelt. I have assisted in more than enough fatal crashes, where I must be the face associated with delivering bad news. So many would not have happened, with the simple act of buckling up.

I have shared only a few stories with you. Truth is, every single one of our officers could share these same stories one right after another. I appreciate the opportunity to stand before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.





