

SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

Honorable David Clemens, Chairman

SB 2121 Testimony

January 15, 2021

Chairman Clemens and Committee,

My name is Brad Bekkedahl and I am from Williston and represent District 1 in the Senate. The bill before you to today is being introduced by myself on behalf of the coalition representing the Vision Zero campaign. I am honored to work with them to help save the lives of our family, friends, and fellow citizens. We all know that seatbelts save lives. Seatbelts are the single most effective safety device to prevent death and injury in a motor vehicle crash. The truth is, not wearing a seat belt is already against the law for front seat occupants and children required to be in approved safety seats. Yet, every 5 days an unbelted vehicle occupant is thrown from their vehicle in a crash in our state. And, nearly half of all motor vehicle fatalities were unbelted in 2019. Statistics prove that a stronger seat belt law in our state would save lives. North Dakota is one of only 15 state left in the country with a secondary enforcement seatbelt law.

Senate bill 2121 updates existing state law in two ways. First, it changes enforcement from a secondary offense to a primary offense. Second, it changes the requirement from front seat occupants to all occupants in the vehicle. The original version of the bill before you also has a change in the fine structure from \$20.00 to \$50.00. But with the committee's consent I have with me an amendment for your consideration that removes that provision and maintains the fine at the \$20.00 level that currently exists. This confirms that the bill is about saving lives and not about increasing any revenue stream. The two remaining changes will not only save lives, but will save taxpayers money, and will cost nothing to implement.

Data shows us that a primary seatbelt law is proven to work. Today we have an 83% observed seatbelt use rate in North Dakota. While improved over the last two decades, it is still one of the worst compliance rates in the nation. However, states that have transitioned to a primary seatbelt law have seen an immediate 10-12% increase in their observed usage rates, which could take North Dakota up to a nearly 95% compliance rate, and correspondingly reduce injuries and save lives!

The primary seatbelt law is not about law enforcement writing tickets, or even about officers pulling people over. It's about saving lives. According to National Highway Transportation Safety Administration data, having a primary seatbelt law would have saved 5 lives in North Dakota last year. Not a large number but if a significant number for those families that lost relatives last year if one of them could have been their family member. Not only will this bill save lives, but it is known that among drivers and front seat passengers, seat belts reduce the risk of death and serious injury by 45% and 50% respectively. And for people in front seats of SUV's, vans, and pickups, the use of seatbelts reduces the risk of a fatal injury by 60% and a moderate to critical injury by 65%.

In conclusion Chairman Clemens and Committee members, we must remember that driving is not a right, it is a privilege and it already has many regulations and requirements attached to that privilege. And with that privilege comes responsibility. Just as we have laws that require us to drive the speed limit, stop at stop signs, and use our turn signals, wearing a seatbelt to protect ourselves and others should be a part of our privilege to drive and ride in a vehicle.