

Testimony

Senate Bill 2121

Senate Transportation Committee

Friday – January 15, 2021

Safe Kids Grand Forks / Carma Hanson

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Carma Hanson. I am the Coordinator of Safe Kids Grand Forks, an injury prevention coalition that covers northeast North Dakota and northwest Minnesota. Altru Health System is the lead agency for our coalition and our membership consists of over 200 businesses, agencies, individuals, service clubs and community members who come together under the umbrella of injury prevention for children. I am also a certified child passenger safety technician (car seat expert) and have spent much of my career implementing effective strategies that prevent unintentional injuries and deaths, particularly in children.

Over the years, I have been a part of the statewide group of experts that gather routinely to create the North Dakota Vision Zero Plan. This plan is required by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and is spearheaded by the North Dakota Department of Transportation. It includes members from several state agencies who are charged with making our North Dakota roadways safer and reducing traffic injuries and fatalities and reducing costs to taxpayers. In the past, experts have come together from areas such as law enforcement, traffic engineers, metropolitan planning organizations, county agencies, child passenger safety, emergency medical providers and others to create a strategy for making our North Dakota roadways safer. When our team gathers, we create a plan hoping to mirror the evidence-based outcomes proven successful in other states – **things that we know work**.

From results seen in other states that have implemented a primary belt law (currently there are 34 other states that have them) we know that a primary seat belt bill is a proven effective strategy in reducing traffic injuries and fatalities and decreasing costs to state agencies and funding sources such as Medicaid and Workforce Safety & Insurance. In fact, enacting a primary seat belt bill has been a part of our Vision Zero plan for many years and we need the help of our North Dakota legislature to carry out that strategy, one that will have significant lives saved and economic cost reductions. At a time in our state when we need to evaluate cost savings from all angles, this is an area in which we can see a cost savings with NO cost to implement and no services being cut. Let's dig further into those opportunities:

USAGE DATA:

- On average, North Dakota's seat belt usage is about 83%, placing us as the 7th lowest state in the nation for seat belt use; this is not a statistic to be proud of. That seat belt

usage rate leaves 122,000 citizens unprotected in their vehicles and this 16% is contributing to over half of the deaths seen on our roadways each year.

- While seat belt usage rates have gone up over the years, ND's seat belt usage has been lower than the national average over the last 10 years; we can do better than that and we know that the majority of those not belted will likely not do so because of an educational campaign alone. Simply passing this bill will have a positive effect on seat belt usage rates/.

Other factors to consider:

- States that have implemented a primary belt law have seen an increase in seat belt usage of 10-12 percentage points **EVEN WITHOUT ANY ENFORCEMENT EFFORTS**. That being said, North Dakota could see an increase in belt usage to somewhere in the 90% range - saving lives and saving money.
- Living in Grand Forks and with that being a border community to Minnesota, I often hear people who say, "I buckle up when I cross the bridge into Minnesota" or "I set my cruise control when I get into that state because I don't want to get caught". Legislation works at changing our culture and our behaviors.
- Minnesota passed a primary belt law in 2009 and saw an increase in observed seat belt use from a baseline of 86.7 percent in 2008 to a peak of 94.8 percent in 2013. Also, the percent of unbelted motor vehicle crash fatalities in MN decreased nearly 16 percent from a baseline of 46.2 percent in 2008 to a low of 30.3 percent in 2016. An evaluation of the impact of the MN law change was conducted by the University of Minnesota in 2014. The study estimated the following:
 - There have been 132 fewer fatalities from motor vehicle crashes, 434 fewer serious injuries, and 1270 fewer moderate injuries since the PBL went into effect.
 - This translated into at least \$67 million in avoided hospital charges which includes direct charges of nearly \$16 million or more Minnesota tax dollars that would have been billed to Medicare, Medicaid and other government insurers.
 - These successes seen in our neighboring Minnesota are replicated across the country by other states that have made the move to a primary seat belt bill. We know this works and we need your help to make it happen.
- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for people under age 35 in our state. We need to address this as a public health issue and the solution to this is simple and does not cost a thing. . . . wearing seat belts saves lives. We can make an impact in the lives of children, teens and adults by implementing this legislation.

- Those that oppose seat belt use often say that “it only affects me if I decide to not wear a belt”. That answer is selfish and untrue. As tax paying citizens, we all bear the cost of those decisions in tax money. I also urge you to listen to our first responders and law enforcement officers who speak of the horrific impact it has on them to respond to the scene of a crash with people injured and killed. I will allow those wearing the uniform to speak to that personally, but I challenge you that “it only affects me” could not be further from the truth if you listen to their real-life stories.

Here is what is projected as it relates to North Dakota passing a primary law:

PRIMARY SEAT BELT LAWS:

- In recent years, NHTSA estimates that if North Dakota were to pass a primary belt law, seat belt usage could increase by approximately 7 percentage points (some states have seen 10-12% increases).
- With a primary law, North Dakota could save approximately 7 lives, 61 serious injuries, and \$18 million in costs each year. (Based on a 6.9 percentage point increase from the 2016 seat belt use rate.)

Driving a motor vehicle is a privilege, not a right and with that privilege comes some expectations. Just as we are expected to use a turn signal when we change lanes or turn a corner, we stop at a red light or we register our cars with the DOT, using a seatbelt is already a law. Our law enforcement officers should be given the ability to enforce that law just as any other one. While they are not looking for a reason to “write tickets”, they are advocating for and using strategies that will prevent injuries and deaths on our roadways, a task assigned to them by our state.

Governor Burgum has been bold in his announcement of the North Dakota Vision Zero Plan that was launched three years ago. He and the DOT know that this law can and will make a difference to the citizens of our state. 61% of North Dakotas favor a primary belt law and we are asking for your support of SB 2121 to provide that provision in our state law.

I thank you for allowing me to testify today in support of SB 2121 and I would entertain any questions you may have.

Contact information:

Carma Hanson, MS, RN
Coordinator – Safe Kids Grand Forks
701.739.1591
chanson@altru.org