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Before the City of Chicago
Committee on Public Safety

January 11th, 2018

The National Safety Council (NSC) is pleased to discuss the potential of technology to address the dangers of distracted driving to the Chicago Committee on Public Safety today. I would like to thank Chairman Reboyras, Vice Chair Cochran and members of the committee for convening this hearing to examine the textalyzer, a technology that could potentially help inform our collective efforts to curb distracted driving.

The National Safety Council is a 100-year-old nonprofit committed to eliminating preventable deaths in our lifetime by focusing on injuries in workplaces, in homes and communities and on the road. Our more than 13,500 member companies represent more than 50,000 U.S. worksites, including over 2,400 in Illinois.

Motor vehicle fatalities in Illinois have increased 18 percent over the past two years; 1,078 lives were lost in 2016, according to National Safety Council estimates.[1] Because many drivers do not realize that there is no safe way to use a mobile device while driving, these distractions are responsible for too many of these preventable deaths. NSC analysis of NHTSA FARS data show that 3,450 lives were claimed by distracted driving across the United States in 2016 but acknowledges that this is an undercount. Each of these numbers represent a person who leaves behind loved ones.

Public Perceptions of Distracted Driving

We know that hands-free is not risk-free. Research indicates drivers using handheld or hands-free phones only see about 50 percent of all the information in their driving environment. This phenomenon is called "inattention blindness" and can lead to drivers missing details such as stop signs and pedestrians.[2] According to a survey of drivers around the country conducted by NSC, 47 percent of drivers mistakenly believe they can safely text while driving.[3] However, distracted driving is the second greatest traffic concern for NSC survey respondents, behind drunk driving. According to the same survey, there was widespread support for instituting laws regulating the use of devices while driving. Results showed that eighty percent of respondents support laws that would ban the use of hand-held devices while driving, and sixty-five percent would support the total ban on the use of devices, including hands-free.

The City of Chicago was an early adopter of these laws, implementing its first ban on talking on a hand held cellphone in 2005, and then strengthening the law to include a ban on texting in 2008. While this is a good start, more can always be done to combat distracted driving.

Our survey told us that sixty-seven percent indicated they felt they were at risk because another driver was distracted by technology. Yet, only twenty-five percent said their own distraction from technology was putting others at risk. According to the AAA 2016 Traffic Safety Culture Index, over forty percent of drivers reported having read a text or email in the past thirty days, and over thirty percent typed one.[4]

Distraction is not only about mobile devices. Some in-vehicle systems can cause distraction that could lead to crashes. Another recent AAA study found that it could take a driver up to 27 seconds to send a text message or email through in-vehicle infotainment systems.[5] This study was profiled in the Chicago Tribune last year stating, “A driver of a car moving at 25 mph could spend 40 seconds, or about the time it takes to drive the length of three football fields.”[6]

Unfortunately, many drivers continue to drive distracted even when they are aware of the crash risk. In part, this "not me" attitude remains prevalent because people mistakenly believe they are better drivers than those around them and they do not fear enforcement of the laws.

Insufficient Crash Data

There is ample evidence that distracted driving is causing more crashes than what the data shows. According to the report done by the NSC “Crashes Involving Cell Phones: Challenges of Collecting and Reporting Reliable Crash Data” there is no reliable method to accurately determine how many crashes involve mobile devices.[7] This makes it impossible to know the true scope of the problem. The report outlines a number of issues with collected accurate data on whether or not cell phone use was a contributing factor in a motor vehicle crash:

- Police often times have to rely on drivers to admit to cell phone use, which is not always possible either by omission by the driver or because they are seriously injured or deceased.
- If there is a more obvious violation, such as speeding or impairment, cell phone use may not be fully investigated.
- If cell phone use is identified as a contributing factor during the investigation, crash reports may not be updated.
- Cell phone records can be difficult to obtain from wireless companies, and if they are obtained, data must align with the precise moment of the crash, which is not always known.

In addition, According to the NSC report, “Undercounted is Underinvested: How Incomplete Crash Reports Impact Efforts to Save Lives”, twenty-six states lack fields to capture texting and thirty-two states lack fields to capture hands-free mobile device use in their crash reports. Illinois captures handheld or any cell phone use and texting with cell phones, but does not have a field to capture hands-free use or talking on cell phones. These are missed opportunities to capture critical data that could help inform the risks around distracted driving.

Another major reason for the lack of good data is the absence of tools to help inform these crash investigations. There is not a lot currently available for law enforcement and crash investigators to easily determine whether a driver was texting or using their phone when a crash occurred. New technologies have the potential to provide a much clearer picture of the factors leading up to a crash. Technological solutions could help fill this gap. We applaud your recognition of this danger and the potential of technology to address it, as well as your efforts to address this public health crisis on Chicago’s streets.

Solutions

As noted above, lack of reliable data on the actual impact of distracted driving makes it difficult to develop interventions that will lower the risks. This is where technology can be a solution to a problem caused by technology. Distracted driving needs to be approached in a similar fashion

to how drunk driving was approached decades ago. There has to be an effort to pass strong laws banning the use of devices while driving, to enforce the laws to the fullest extent possible, and to educate drivers on how serious a risk distracted driving poses.

NSC would like to make the following recommendations to the City of Chicago to help address distracted driving:

1. Enforce existing distracted driving laws as strongly as possible.
2. Increase education efforts to ensure Chicagoans understand the risks of distracted driving as well as the laws governing them. This education should the risks of include in-vehicle infotainment systems.
3. Ensure Chicago crash reports include the fields on distracted driving recommended in the NSC report "Undercounted is Underinvested: How Incomplete Crash Reports Impact Efforts to Save Lives."
4. Strengthen Chicago's distracted driving laws to ban all handheld device use, including when used in hands-free modes.
5. Encourage the robust testing of new technologies to aid with eliminating distracted driving.

The education aspect of the equation has already made a difference. Surveys conducted by NSC, as noted above, demonstrate that drivers are very concerned about the risks posed by distracted driving. The results show people are beginning to understand how risky driving while distracted is, but this does not consistently deter them from using devices while they are driving themselves. Strong laws and strong enforcement would go a long way in closing this gap.

We should embrace innovative approaches that may bring us closer to understanding the problem, and the textalyzer has the potential to do that. Of course, all technologies should be thoroughly vetted and tested before they're widely adopted. If there is technology that could potentially deter a driver from being distracted, it should be explored before it is rejected. Lives are at stake.

Road to Zero

On October 5, 2016, NSC, NHTSA, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) announced the *Road to Zero* (RTZ) Coalition. RTZ is an initiative focused on identifying new ways to look at the persistent problem of roadway fatalities. Today, nearly one year later, there are over 552 unique organizations that have joined the coalition that I am honored to support with a number of other organizations dedicated to eliminating fatalities on our roads. The City of Chicago and the Chicago Department of Transportation are two of those members.

Our shared vision of a future with no roadway fatalities cannot be realized unless we double down on efforts supporting existing solutions and accelerate implementation of new solutions. Promoting safety culture so that using a device while behind the wheel is unacceptable is another key component to reduce fatalities.

A critical part of the Road to Zero is the yearly allocation of grants to organizations that are pursuing innovation solutions to the epidemic of motor vehicle related fatalities. The City of Chicago is a recipient of the inaugural Road to Zero Safe Systems innovation grant last year. Specifically, the Chicago Department of Transportation, in partnership with the Office of the Mayor, the Chicago Police Department and more than a dozen City departments and sister

agencies collaborated to develop a pilot community outreach and engagement process centered on traffic safety in a single high crash, high hardship area: Garfield Park. It is my hope the learnings from our own Chicago can help inform efforts in areas throughout this country facing similar causes of roadway fatalities.

Additionally, in early 2018, the Road to Zero coalition will produce a vision for reaching zero fatalities on our roadways by 2050. I look forward to sharing this document with you, as I know it will be an important addition to the discussion of roadway safety policy development.

Conclusion

We cannot continue to do things the same way and expect different results. When it comes to saving lives on our roadways, this means implementing policies that allow for the advancement of new technologies. By advancing technology, the issue before you today represents a step in that direction to move us closer to a goal of zero fatalities on the roadways.

NSC would like to recognize the City of Chicago for all the work its doing to reduce motor vehicle related fatalities, especially around efforts like “Vision Zero Chicago” which has the goal of eliminating roadway fatalities and serious injuries on our city streets, in part by raising awareness of dangerous driving behaviors like driving while distracted.

The National Safety Council is committed to working with you to advance safety, up to and including the integration of new technologies and tools into our efforts to reach zero. Doing this well is essential. Safety delayed is safety denied.

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[1] NSC Motor Vehicle Fatality Estimates. http://www.nsc.org/NewsDocuments/2017/12-month-estimates.pdf
[2] NSC Report, Understanding the Distracted Brain: http://www.nsc.org/DistractedDrivingDocuments/Cognitive-Distraction-White-Paper.pdf.
[3] NSC Driver Safety Poll. http://www.nsc.org/NewsDocuments/2017/Driver-Safety-Poll.pdf
[4] AAA 2016 Traffic Safety Culture Index: https://www.aaafoundation.org/sites/default/files/2016TrafficSafetyCultureIndexReportandCover_0.pdf.
[5] AAA 2017 Report on Visual and Cognitive Demands on Using In-Vehicle Infotainment Systems: http://exchange.aaa.com/safety/distracted-driving/#.Wk_9DdNSw2z
[6] “Cars' new tech keeps drivers connected, increases risk of distracted driving, study finds” October 5, 2017, Chicago Tribune: http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-aaa-study-car-technology-distractions-20171004-story.html.
[7] NSC Report, Crashes Involving Cell Phones: Challenges of Collecting and Reporting Reliable Crash Data: http://www.nsc.org/DistractedDrivingDocuments/NSC-Under-Reporting-White-Paper.pdf.