

Massachusetts Prevent Injuries NOW! Network

April 9, 2009

The Honorable James E. Timilty, Senate Chair
The Honorable Michael A. Costello, House Chair
Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security
State House, Boston, MA 02133

Dear Senator Timilty and Representative Costello:

On behalf of the Massachusetts Prevent Injuries Now! Network, I write today to request the Committee's swift and favorable action on Senate Bill 950, which would amend Massachusetts' existing seat belt law to make the Commonwealth a primary enforcement seat belt state.

The Massachusetts Prevent Injuries Now! Network is a coalition of more than 50 private and public sector partners dedicated to reducing the incidence and severity of unintentional injuries in our state. Established in 2005 under a federal grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, MassPINN brings together medical, health care, child welfare and public safety advocates to advance policy initiatives that will benefit the people of our Commonwealth.

Senate Bill 950, which was introduced this year by Senator Jehlen of Somerville, is both timely and long overdue. Timely in that Massachusetts will stand to receive an additional \$13.6 million in federal highway funds if we enact a primary seat belt law by June 30 of this year. Long overdue in that Massachusetts currently ranks dead last in the nation in seat belt usage.

Seat belts not only save lives and prevent injuries, they preserve the quality of life for auto crash victims and allow us all to live healthier, safer lives. But in spite of irrefutable scientific data going back decades, the Legislature has never enacted a primary belt law here in Massachusetts.

*Massachusetts is one of a handful of states without a primary enforcement law. Because of this, one in three Bay Staters do not buckle up when driving, compared to 83 percent who DO wear seat belts nationally.

This is a great shame for our state, which prides itself in being advanced in so many other public health and safety areas. Consider the following facts:

- Motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of injury death among MA residents. In 2006, in MA, there were over 300 deaths, 2,960 acute care hospitalizations and over 69,000 emergency department visits associated with motor vehicle occupant injuries.^{1,2}
- In 2006, forty-five percent of motor vehicle occupant deaths and eleven percent of nonfatal motor vehicle occupant injuries among MA residents had a TBI (traumatic brain injury).^{1,2}
- In 2007 in Massachusetts, every single passenger vehicle occupant who was ejected from the vehicle and died, in cases where seat belt use could be determined, was found to be not wearing a seat belt

Passage of Senate Bill 950 is the best tool at our disposal to address this problem, save lives, and reduce injuries. In 2007, seat belt use rates in states with primary enforcement averaged 14 percentage points higher than in states with secondary enforcement laws (87% versus 73%).³

It is critical that we act in support of a primary seat belt law, and to act NOW.

Congress has created an incentive program to encourage states to pass primary seat belt laws. But the incentive program ends this year. If we pass the bill by July 1, 2009, **Massachusetts would receive more than \$13 million for use in traffic safety efforts** in the state this year. If we fail to act, we will forfeit this money.

There is clear evidence that primary seat belt laws work and that seat belt usage saves lives. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for young people ages 5 – 34, and it costs Massachusetts more than \$6 billion a year on the medical expenses, lost productivity, property damage and related costs to car crashes.

While we should consider this legislation in any year, this year the promise of the more than \$13.6 million in federal funding is indeed an incentive.

For all these reasons, the cost of not enacting a primary seat belt law is far too great for Massachusetts, both financially and, more important, in terms of lives lost and shattered. I urge the committee to act quickly, in support of Senate Bill 950.

Sincerely,



Sean Kane
Chairman MASS PINN