

**Testimony before the Ohio Senate
Highways & Transportation Committee
in support of House Bill 320
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Good morning Chairman Buehrer and committee members. My name is Brian Newbacher and I'm here on behalf of the Ohio Conference of AAA Clubs. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you in support of House Bill 320.

(Booster seats help protect children from injury and death in crashes by ensuring that the adult seat belt fits properly. Proper fit reduces the risk of "lap belt syndrome," which occurs when the lap belt portion of the adult seat belt rides up into a child's abdomen, potentially causing internal injuries to vital organs.)

According to a recent AAA survey conducted nationally, more than half of all parents (54 percent) look to their state law for guidance on how to restrain their children.

While a strong majority (93 percent) of parents surveyed said they are aware of their state's child restraint laws, less than half (39 percent) can accurately identify the age at which their state allows a child to ride in an automobile with only a lap and shoulder belt.

These results send a clear message: Stronger laws and better education will save additional young lives and prevent serious injuries.

In a recent six-year-period in Ohio, from 2002 through 2007, motor vehicle crashes killed 89 children ages 4 through 7 and injured more than 21,000 (21,327) in the same age group, according to the Ohio Department of Public Safety.

The rationale behind trying to reverse these numbers is that the effectiveness of booster seats in protecting children from serious crash-related injuries is well documented.

For example, a study by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (Dr.'s Durbin, Winston, as published in JAMA, June 4, 2003) reported that booster seats reduced the odds of sustaining significant injuries in a crash by 59 percent (of children ages 4-7 in 15 states). Booster seats are especially effective in reducing injuries to the abdomen, neck, spine, back, and lower extremities.

All too often, children over the age of four prematurely graduate to the manufacturer-installed safety belts. These are systems that are designed and tested for 168-pound adult males. To get a better sense of the problem, I have reviewed a number of fatal crash reports in which 4-8-year-olds were killed.

I spoke to one woman from Amanda, Ohio, last week who lost her six-year-old earlier this year when she lost control of her vehicle and slammed into a utility pole. Because her son was in the front passenger seat with only a lap belt he did not survive. While I cannot say with certainty that her son would be alive if he had been in the back seat properly secured in a booster seat with both the shoulder and lap belts, I can say with absolute confidence he would have had a fighting chance.

While the mismatch of a small child to an adult lap or lap and shoulder belt is obvious to the trained eye, parents and caregivers cannot be entirely faulted for bypassing the booster seat stage.

As I said earlier, parents often look to laws for guidance on how to protect their children in a vehicle. The lack of widespread and well-funded educational efforts, coupled with a state law that provides only minimal coverage for children over the age of four, creates a false sense of security for many parents. They believe they're transporting their children in the safest manner possible—when in fact—they are not.

Child Passenger Safety Technicians from AAA and the Safe Kids organization have seen first hand thousands of situations where a child is placed in an adult seat belt too early.

A booster seat raises the child so that the vehicle's lap and shoulder belts fit properly. The lap portion fits snug across the hips and the shoulder belt angles across the shoulder and chest. This simple and relatively inexpensive solution saves lives and reduces injuries.

There is research that illustrates this point. A recent study by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia shows that children (aged 4 through 7) in states with booster seat laws are 39 percent more likely to be appropriately restrained in a booster seat or child safety seat than children in states without such laws.

There's also a monetary incentive to support this legislation. The federal transportation reauthorization of 2005 (SAFETEA-LU) provides Child Passenger Safety grants to states that enact primary booster seat laws.

Anywhere from \$255,000 to \$1.39 million is available to Ohio in 2009 if a primary booster seat law is enacted, depending on the number of states that qualify.

States receiving grants can use the funds for education, enforcement and training activities, as well as to purchase and distribute booster seats to low-income families. In fact, up to 50 percent of those funds could be used for low-income eligible families to pay for as many as 25,000 booster seats. (AAA was a strong national advocate for including the CPS grants in the federal transportation bill.)

House Bill 320 is consistent with federal recommendations and represents great progress in child passenger safety. AAA commends Representative Shannon Jones and Senator Erich Kearney for their leadership on this critical issue.

With 43 states already having a booster seat law in place to protect older children in vehicles, let's make Ohio the 44th. I encourage the committee to vote in favor of HB 320.

Additional information can be found at the website for the Ohio Booster Seat Coalition, at boostohiokids.org. I will be happy to answer any questions or feel free to call on AAA at your convenience. Thank you.