

Testimony
House Bill 1335
House Transportation Committee
Friday, February 1, 2013
North Dakota Department of Health

Good morning, Chairman Ruby and members of the House Transportation Committee. My name is Terry Dwelle and I am the State Health Officer for the North Dakota Department of Health. I am here to testify on House Bill 1335.

The mission of the North Dakota Department of Health is to protect and enhance the health and safety of all North Dakotans and the environment in which we live.

We review causes of death in North Dakota and develop programs to reduce the risk factors that are associated with complications and death in the state. Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for North Dakotans ages 1 to 44, with motor vehicle crashes the most common cause of injury death in the state. A review of motor vehicle accidents in North Dakota since 2007 shows that the number of people who died while not wearing seat belts was more than double the number of fatalities in which seat belts were in use. Twenty-four percent of unrestrained fatalities (273 total) between 2007-2011 were people younger than 20 years old (207 between 16-20 and 66 ≤ 15).

Deaths are not the only adverse outcome from vehicle crashes. Many people sustain life-long injuries and complications associated with crashes, including traumatic brain or spinal cord injuries that can permanently impact quality of life, economic status and health-care costs. Many of these severe complications of crashes are associated with ejections or violent impact with vehicle parts or the windshield in those not wearing seat belts. The average inpatient costs for traffic crash victims who did not use seat belts were 50 percent higher than for victims who were belted.

Lap-shoulder seat belts reduce the risk of fatal injury by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injuries by 50 percent depending on the type of vehicle and seating position involved. For light truck occupants, safety belts reduce the risk of fatal injury by 60 percent and moderate to critical injury by 65 percent. Most people don't dispute the effectiveness of seat belts. The debate usually centers on whether seat belt laws should have primary or secondary enforcement. In a 2011 study, states with primary enforcement seat belt laws

had a use rate of 87 percent, while states with secondary enforcement laws had seat belt use rates of 76 percent.

A primary seat belt law in North Dakota is conservatively expected over 10 years to save 70 lives, prevent 200 incapacitating and 500 non-capacitating injuries, and avoid \$1,710 in costs per North Dakota household. An additional observation is that when Louisiana adopted a primary seat belt law, child restraint use jumped from 45 to 82 percent, even though the state's child passenger safety law did not change.

This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.