

PREVENTING DISTRACTED DRIVING AT WORK: Public-Private Partnerships

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Motor vehicle crashes are consistently the leading cause of work-related fatalities in the U.S. In 2008, 1,215 workers who were driving or riding in a motor vehicle died in work-related crashes on public roadways, accounting for 23 percent of all worker fatalities (U.S. Department of Labor 2010). Reducing the human and economic toll of crashes requires strong partnerships between government, industry, labor and researchers. Current initiatives to prevent distracted driving demonstrate how these diverse interests can work together toward a common safety goal.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), distraction is a “specific type of inattention that occurs when drivers divert their attention from the driving task to focus on some other activity instead” (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration 2010). Crash data suggests that distracted driving was a contributing factor in 16 percent of all U.S. motor-vehicle fatalities in 2009. Typical distractions include cell phones, text messaging, eating, adjusting vehicle controls and automated road signs. For workers, in-vehicle information systems for tracking clients, deliveries or inventory may impose additional distraction risks. The desire to increase productivity and efficiency, as well as pressures created by tight schedules and unforeseen delays, can provide incentives for workers to make calls, send text messages or access in-vehicle information systems while driving.

Research suggests that the work environment does add to the risks of distracted driving. A study of construction and sales workers found that compared to leisure driving, workplace driving was associated with higher levels of being in a hurry, thinking about work, tiredness and use of mobile phones (Salminen and Lähdeniemi 2002).

A recent study of truck drivers based on actual on-road driving behavior found that 60 percent of “safety-critical events” were associated with some kind of distraction. Drivers who were text messaging had 23 times the risk of experiencing a safety-critical event compared to those who were not. Interacting with a dispatching device increased the risk by a factor of 10 and dialing a cell phone by a factor of 6 (Hickman, Hanowski and Bocanegra 2010). Another study highlighted potential risks of in-vehicle information systems used in police cars (Hampton and Langham 2005).

Policies to prevent distracted driving on and off the job combine legislative and voluntary initiatives. As of this writing, 30 states prohibit text messaging for all drivers and nine states and the District of Columbia ban the use of hand-held cell phones while driving. Some states also ban text messaging by school bus drivers or novice drivers. Because laws and enforcement are not uniform across the U.S., employers can play an important role by setting policies that restrict or prohibit text messaging or the use of cell phones while driving.

A widely-accepted cornerstone of occupational health and safety policy is that commitment and leadership must come from the top of the organization. This is exemplified by the 2009 Executive Order from President Barack Obama, which covers nearly 3 million civilian federal employees. The order prohibits federal employees from text messaging while driving a government-provided vehicle, while driving a personal vehicle on official government business and at any time when using government-supplied electronic equipment while driving.

Prevention of distracted driving is a top priority of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). Secretary of

Transportation Ray LaHood convened two highly successful Distracted Driving summits in 2009 and 2010 to draw attention to the problem. At the 2010 summit, Secretary LaHood commended employers for following the president’s lead and instituting similar bans in their organizations. “Among the important success stories of the last year are the thousands of U.S. companies that have imposed distracted driving policies of their own,” said LaHood.

The DOT regulatory agency for large trucks and buses, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), has taken action by instituting new rules for drivers of large trucks and buses. A new rule, effective since October 2010, prohibits commercial motor vehicle (CMV) drivers from text messaging while operating in interstate commerce. Drivers who fail to comply are subject to civil penalties and disqualification from operating CMVs. In addition, motor carrier companies are prohibited from requiring or allowing their drivers to engage in texting while driving. FMCSA has also proposed to restrict the use of hand-held cell phones – if enacted, this rule would prohibit a CMV driver from reaching for, holding or dialing a mobile telephone while driving.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is emphasizing the prevention of text messaging while driving. At the 2010 Distracted Driving Summit, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis announced that OSHA would focus on preventing distracted driving through education and partnerships, complemented by a new enforcement initiative. In her remarks, Solis stated, “When OSHA receives a credible complaint that an employer requires texting while driving or who organizes work so that texting is a practical necessity, we will investigate

and where necessary issue citations and penalties to end this practice.”

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the federal agency charged with conducting research and making recommendations to improve occupational safety and health, has created the NIOSH Center for Motor Vehicle Safety. Hosted by the NIOSH Division of Safety Research in Morgantown, W.V., this is a virtual center that links NIOSH scientists engaged in motor vehicle safety research through shared computer networks and other technologies. The scope of the center's research and partnerships encompasses all risk factors for motor vehicle-related injuries to workers and thus includes distracted driving. Supporting the efforts of the Departments of Transportation and Labor, NIOSH Director Dr. John Howard has urged employers to set policies to prohibit text messaging while driving, noting that “Strong employer policies to curb the use of cell phones and in-vehicle technologies while driving are an important tool in creating a safe driving culture within an organization.”

Several employer-based and non-governmental organizations are also taking a lead in preventing work-related distracted driving. One example is the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS), a public-private partnership dedicated to improving the safety of employees and their families and communities by preventing traffic crashes occurring on and off the job. NETS is known for its signature Strength in Numbers fleet safety benchmark program, which includes questions on distracted driving policies, and for its annual Drive Safely Work Week (DSWW) campaign. DSWW, held the first week of October, has, for the past several years, emphasized the dangers of distracted driving for the past several years. In 2010, NETS worked with NHTSA to make Drive Safely Work Week campaign materials available for free download from the NETS website at www.trafficsafety.org. More than 5,000 organizations representing more than 20 million employees have taken advantage of this opportunity. Free downloads are still available. Noting the success of this partnership, NETS Chairman Bill Windsor stated, “Corporate cell phone policies are essential pieces of employee

safety equipment.” In addition, the National Safety Council offers a wide range of resources targeted to employers, including campaign posters, policy news, research summaries, suggested strategies to convince top management of the value of cellphone policies and tips to build employee buy-in for new policies.

Interventions to reduce distracted driving address only one element of road risk for workers and will be effective only in the framework of a road safety program that manages the full range of workers' interactions with the vehicle and the road system:

- + Administrative elements: motor vehicle record checks, training, disciplinary procedures, data collection and crash procedures and review;
- + Driver-related elements: seat belts, speeding, distracted driving and impaired driving;
- + Vehicle-related elements: selection criteria, inspection and maintenance; and
- + Operational elements: journey management, fatigue management, routing and scheduling.

Even if all of the above elements are in place, success depends on top management's commitment to accountability, enforcement of policies, collection of road safety performance data and continuous improvement. ★

1“Safety-critical events” are crashes, near-crashes, crash-relevant conflicts and unintentional lane deviations.

REFERENCES

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RESOURCES AND EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Campaign tools from the U.S. Department of Transportation:

www.distracted.gov/campaign-tools/employers/

National Safety Council (home page for distracted driving and “employer policies” page):

www.nsc.org/safety_road/Distracted_Driving/Pages/distracted_driving.aspx

www.nsc.org/safety_road/Distracted_Driving/Pages/EmployerPolicies.aspx

OSHA website on distracted driving:

www.osha.gov/distracted-driving/index.html

Cell phone and texting laws from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety:

www.iihs.org/laws/cellphonelaws.aspx

NIOSH topic page for motor vehicle safety:

www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/motorvehicle/

Network of Employers for Traffic Safety:

www.trafficsafety.org