

TESTIMONY

7/14/98

Michael L. Norris

Pennsylvania State Coroners Association

House Bill 2078

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Mike Norris. I am the Cumberland County Coroner and I am representing the Pennsylvania State Coroners Association in my remarks to you today. The Pennsylvania State Coroners Association wishes to be on record in favor of mandatory seat belt usage. We believe that a secondary offense seat belt enforcement law is simply an effort to encourage voluntary compliance and that a primary offense law will provide for mandated compliance and save countless lives.

As Coroners, it is our responsibility to respond to every traffic death scene and, therefore, we have a unique viewpoint regarding the seat belt issue. While individual police officers may have the occasion to investigate fatal traffic crashes and persons in the emergency medical services may respond to an occasional fatal crash, the County Coroner sees them all. I am in my 17th year as Coroner, was a deputy coroner for 6 years and a police officer for 10 years. I ran with a volunteer ambulance service for more than 30 years and was certified as an Emergency Medical Technician. As a part of my Coroners office, I am the Project Director for the

PennDot Comprehensive Highway Safety Program for a four-county area. One of the responsibilities of this program is on site, visual surveys of seat belt usage in each of our counties. While we have made great strides in increasing seat belt usage in Pennsylvania, we appear to have reached a "glass ceiling", which does not seem to be able to be broken by the public education efforts of many agencies and the limited enforcement efforts allowed by the current seat belt laws. We need to improve our "numbers" to save lives.

I appear here as a seat belt advocate, but this was not always my position. When seat belts first appeared I was among those who took the position that seat belt use should be a matter of personal choice, not mandated by law. My view changed as I watched people dying needlessly simply because they hadn't made the decision or taken the time to "Buckle Up". I became a believer in seat belts and then, with more experience, a seat belt advocate. I speak publicly on the issue and present slide programs which graphically display the need for seat belts. I carry buttons and key chains with me wherever I go to remind people of the importance of seat belts and I will talk to any one who will listen to me on the subject.

Since 1990, as a part of my investigation into traffic fatalities we have been keeping a separate "box score" in my county. After determining whether or not deceased persons

were wearing seat belts at the time of the crash and if they were available, we attempt to make a determination as to whether seat belts usage would have made a difference. In other words, would they have survived if they had buckled up. The results are somewhat amazing. From 1990 to 1997, 119 persons died with seat belts available to them. Of these, 28 died in seat belts, for 26 it was determined that seat belts would probably not have saved them. For 9 persons we were not able to make a clear determination as to whether or not seat belt use would have made a difference. However 56 people died simply because they failed to make the decision to "Buckle Up". This is a phenomenal number, 47% of all of those persons who had seat belts available to them died simply because they didn't use them. These numbers are based on actual traffic death investigations conducted by the Cumberland County Coroner's Office. I don't represent them to be more than that. But, when a county of 200,000 people has had an average of 7 deaths each year for the last 8 years, simply because people failed to "Buckle Up", it clearly gives you 56 more reasons why we need you to enact a primary enforcement seat belt law. Coroners across this Commonwealth can tell similar tales of needless and unnecessary deaths occurring regularly because of the failure of citizens to voluntarily comply with our current seat belt law.

I also want to take a moment and remind every one here

today that as we talk numbers, numbers killed, numbers that could have survived, numbers that should have survived, we need to remember the each of these "numbers" represents a person, a family member, a loved one, someone who was and is sorely missed by family and friends. I don't think anyone who has not been there can truly comprehend what it is like to knock on a door and tell a family that a loved one is not coming home. To know as you deliver this message that the simple effort of buckling a seat belt could have prevented the grief and the pain that you are witnessing as the family absorbs your message makes you wonder what it will take to help stop the carnage. We believe that a primary enforcement seat belt law which allows enforcement of mandatory seat belt usage will help.

I have talked about the number of people who died because they didn't wear a seat belt and I have told you that I believe that you can help to reduce these numbers by enacting a primary enforcement law, but I want to make another comparison. We all seem to recognize that new tools are needed regularly in the war against crime. This session of the legislature has enacted numerous laws for that specific purpose. Homicide is the most serious crime one can commit today and again these needless deaths cause countless family members and friends to suffer grief and pain. It is therefor important to recognize that in the same 8 years that

I mentioned above, the Cumberland County Coroner's office investigated only 30 homicides. Nearly twice as many people died because they weren't wearing seat belts as were killed by others in our most serious criminal offense. Laws to protect citizens from criminal acts and prosecute murderers gain strong bipartisan support while a law that may save nearly twice as many lives has had tough sledding. Again, I make comparisons based on the statistics from my county but as you talk to the Coroners in your own counties you will hear similar numbers and the same concerns.

I'd like to tell you a short personal anecdote. Two years ago, in early December, I presented a slide program on the dual subjects of drinking and driving and the use of seat belts to a group of parents from a local high school. They were reviewing programs that were being presented to the students. Upon the completion of my presentation there was considerable discussion about the message, the content and the graphic presentation. About 3 weeks later (1 week before Christmas) I received a message on my office phone from a lady who told me that she had attended my presentation and was one of those who objected to the graphic presentation, but that it had convinced her to begin wearing her seat belt. She went on to say that she had recently been involved in a serious traffic crash, and that although she had been injured, she had been told by her doctor that she would probably not

have survived had she not been wearing her seat belt. She closed by saying that her family had asked her to call me and thank me for their merry Christmas. You can not imagine the feeling that I had as I listened to that message. I still have the tape.

I believe that your decision regarding this pending legislation can give each of you the feeling that you personally contributed to the saving of some one's life.

Ladies and gentlemen, as a Coroner, representing the Coroners Association, I would like to close by encouraging or rather imploring you to find it in your heart and soul to vote to enact this legislation and make the use of seat belts enforceable as a primary offense in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. It is the only way to convince some people to wear the seat belt that may save their life.