

**Testimony of Helen Witty**  
**National President, Mothers Against Drunk Driving**  
**House Energy and Commerce Committee**  
**Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce**  
**Enhancing Vehicle Technology to Prevent Drunk Driving**  
**March 14, 2018**

Thank you Chairwoman Schakowsky and Ranking Member McMorris-Rodgers for holding this hearing and inviting me to testify. I am here today on behalf of Mothers Against Drunk Driving representing the millions of victims of drunk driving crashes, each of which is 100 percent preventable. To quote the opening sentence in last year's drunk driving study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, "Alcohol-impaired driving remains the deadliest and costliest danger on U.S. roads today."

I also would like to thank Representative Debbie Dingell whom I had the honor to meet in January. Our meeting was extremely productive but came due to unfortunate and unnecessary circumstances.

In January, the Abbas family was driving home from Florida to Michigan when a Kentucky drunk driver with a .306 BAC was travelling the wrong-way on interstate 75. He hit the family head on killing a mother, father, and their three children. The crash was violent, preventable, and devastated the Dearborn community. Thousands gathered on January 8 and 9<sup>th</sup> to pay respects to Rima, a family medicine doctor, Issam, a lawyer and real estate agent, and their three children.

Representative Dingell, MADD applauds your leadership and is proud to work with you to find solutions to stop tragedies like the Abbas crash in the future.

### **Helen's Story**

Like the Abbas family, I have a story to tell. I am here today not by choice, but because someone else made a criminal decision.

On June 1, 2000, my 16-year-old daughter, Helen Marie, went out rollerblading and never came home.

Until that day, my husband, John, and I had our dream family, a boy and a girl named for each of us. We had the perfect names – John and John and Helen and Helen Marie – Helen Marie because I did not want to be known as Big Helen or Old Helen. Helen Marie came first, and she put me through my mom paces. What fun we had! When John arrived three years later, Helen Marie was thrilled, until she learned he was there to stay. But she learned to love him, deeply. They were not perfect children, but they were well-adjusted, and this is all my husband and I had prayed for.

An alcohol and marijuana-impaired teen driver ended that dream. Helen Marie was skating on the bike path just a few blocks from home when she looked up and saw a car headed towards her on that bike path.

All she could do was die.

I cannot fully describe to you the days and months that followed. Making funeral arrangements for our 16-year-old daughter. Answering a call about organ donation. Boxing up the things that held the essence of her. Standing in a criminal courtroom – a place utterly foreign.

I can tell you that MADD saved me. It showed me I wouldn't die from my grief. MADD gave me hope. It gave me a platform on which to lean and then to fight – to work toward a day when no one else ever experiences the pain this crime inflicts. A pain that never, ever goes away. Her life ended, and mine did not. That is why I am here today. To represent H.M. and the hundreds of thousands of DUI victims who can't be here today.

### **Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving**

MADD is the nation's leading organization working to stop drunk driving. Since our founding in 1980, drunk driving deaths have been cut in half. Proven countermeasures like the 21 minimum drinking age law, zero tolerance laws for those under 21, and the national .08 BAC standard are some of MADD's proudest achievements. More importantly, MADD has put a face to the crime of drinking and driving and changed the national views on this issue. While drunk driving is no longer culturally acceptable, it is unfortunately still tolerated.

Despite all the challenges facing traffic safety today, drunk driving remains the number one killer on the roadways. The good news is that MADD has a plan – but we need Congressional leadership to help make this plan a reality. Our Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving launched in 2006 and serves as a blueprint for literally eliminating drunk driving in America. The campaign is based on proven DUI countermeasures steeped in data and research.

First, MADD supports law enforcement and their efforts to stop drunk drivers through high visibility enforcement. We know that sobriety checkpoints, when coupled with highly visible media, either paid or earned, can reduce drunk driving deaths by 20 percent.

The twice annual *Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over* high visibility enforcement campaigns are critical. These ads are targeted to specific age groups most likely to drive impaired and are an important reminder that if you drink and drive, you will get caught. MADD believes that in addition to two "crackdowns" focused on alcohol, the National Highway Traffic Administration should conduct another separate crackdown focused on drugged driving. This would keep messaging clear and concise.

It is important to note that Congress established the crackdowns as part of the SAFETEA-LU highway reauthorization bill. Specifically, the law allows for at least three annual high visibility law enforcement events to include two on drunk driving and one on seat belts.

With regard to law enforcement, it is a major concern that drunk driving arrests have dropped while deaths have risen. Attached is a chart that shows FBI DUI arrest data over the past 15 years. DUI arrests were highest in 2008 with 1.171 million. In 2017 that number dropped by over 31 percent to 802,000. Law enforcement is the first line of defense in getting all impaired drivers off the road. We must encourage leaders to make traffic enforcement a priority.

In November, MADD hosted a law enforcement conference here in the D.C. area and brought together leaders from all over the country so we could listen to the challenges facing police. In jurisdictions that prioritize traffic safety, we learned that all crimes were down. Clearly this is a complex issue, but MADD looks forward to working with this committee, Congress, and the administration to find ways to encourage law enforcement to make traffic safety a priority.

Second, MADD believes every convicted drunk driver should be required to use an ignition interlock device. Interlocks are about the size of a cell phone and are hard wired to the offender's vehicle. In order to start the car, the driver must blow into the interlock and if the breath sample is below the preset limit, the car will not start.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), interlocks reduce DUI recidivism by 67 percent. Studies also show that states that enact laws requiring all DUI offenders to use an interlock reduce DUI deaths by up to 15 percent. Incredibly 50 to 75 percent of convicted drunk drivers will continue to drive even on a suspended driver's license, so the traditional thinking of license suspension no longer works.

Progress in the states has been amazing. When our campaign started in 2006, New Mexico was the only state to require interlocks for all drunk drivers. Today, 32 states require drunk drivers to use these devices. Attached are two maps which help illustrate progress.

Third, MADD supports advanced vehicle technologies which could one day prevent a drunk driver from operating a vehicle. The idea for such a technology was born in 2006 at a MADD technology symposium in New Mexico. The concept was to integrate into the vehicle a passive alcohol sensor to unobtrusively detect a driver's BAC. A report from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimates that such a technology could save over 7,000 lives each year.

The concept became reality over a decade ago and is known as the Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety, or DADSS. MADD has always supported DADSS and successfully advocated for legislation to authorize the program which was championed in this committee by Rep. John Sarbanes. This legislation eventually became part of the last two highway authorization bills. It is important to note that the current authorization is set to expire in 2020 so time is of the essence.

I witnessed this technology first-hand at the 2015 MADD National Conference which included an event with the global unveiling of the DADSS test vehicle at the U.S. Department of Transportation. It truly was a moving experience. Over 400 MADD volunteers and victims hung on every word from event speakers Deputy Transportation Secretary Victor Mendez, NHTSA Administrator Mark Rosekind, Senator Tom Udall, Representative Nita Lowey, and ACTS

President Rob Strassburger. Event speakers announced strong support for the DADSS program, and pledged to continue pushing to ensure this technology is in vehicles as soon as possible.

I will let others speak to the specifics of this program, as we are not experts on vehicle technology development or selling cars. We are victims of a preventable crime who want there to be no more victims. We worked diligently to get this program started and to get the government funding to advance this program.

MADD's goal is to get this technology into vehicles for consumers to purchase as soon as possible. We are told that the program has made substantial progress and we are led to believe that the technology has advanced to the point where it can - and must - be transferred to the auto industry so that vehicle integration, large scale fleet testing and ultimately commercialization can occur. The government's role should be to help this transfer and begin a rulemaking process to ensure successful implementation of the technology.

### **MADD Challenge**

Therefore, I am here today to issue a challenge to the auto industry, including OEM's and suppliers, and the government, to make DADSS commercially available and for NHTSA to begin a rulemaking on DADSS as soon as possible.

To aid in transferring DADSS to the auto industry for commercialization, a large fleet test would help expedite the technology. In 1982, the General Services Administration ordered 5,000 cars with driver's side airbags. It is our understanding that this stimulated the market and resulted in widespread acceptance and use.

MADD calls for a similar model to be enacted for the DADSS technology to be incorporated into future GSA vehicle fleets.

We understand that DADSS development is challenging in many ways. But the industry has the resources and expertise to make safety advancements a reality. Automatic braking, electronic stability control, lane departure warnings and airbags throughout the vehicle are some of the technologies that are widely deployed and even taken for granted today. Alcohol detection technology needs to be a top priority for the auto industry, for Congress, and for the Administration. With this Committee's continued leadership, we could soon witness historic results in terms of lives saved on our nation's roads. How long are we willing to wait?

Today autonomous vehicles (AVs) are the talk of the nation. Automobile companies, suppliers, and technology companies are spending tens of billions of dollars to develop this technology. MADD is proud to support AVs and we believe that one day they will significantly improve road safety when fully implemented. We also know that it will take time to bring this technology to market. In the meantime, nearly 11,000 people are killed in drunk driving crashes every year. DADSS could save over 7,000 lives annually, helping bridge the gap between an autonomous future and our present day.

## **Closing**

Thank you Madam Chairwoman Schkawosky and Ranking Member McMorris-Rodgers for allowing me the opportunity to testify on this important issue. Your leadership and the leadership of this committee is to be commended. Drunk driving remains the biggest killer on our roadways. If we are to make meaningful progress in reducing traffic fatalities, we must address this issue.

The good news is that we know how to stop these deaths. Strong law enforcement, requiring ignition interlocks for all convicted drunk drivers, and the commercialization of DADSS could all lead to the elimination of drunk driving.

Drunk driving will affect two out of three people in our country. It took the life of my daughter. Let's prevent this tragedy before it becomes personal for so many others. The opportunity to save lives – real people – is within reach.

I look forward to working with all of the members of this committee and am happy to answer any questions you might have.