

Opening Statement of the Honorable Tim Murphy
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “The GM Ignition Switch Recall: Why Did It Take So Long?”
April 1, 2014

(As Prepared for Delivery)

I now convene this hearing of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, entitled “The GM Ignition Switch Recall: Why Did It Take So Long?”

This question is the focus of our investigation.

As soon as the Chevy Cobalt rolled off the production line in 2004, customers began filing complaints about the ignition switch. These customers told GM that just by bumping the key with their knee while driving, the Cobalt would shut off. In 2004 and 2005, GM engineers twice considered the problem and even developed potential solutions to fix it. But GM decided the “tooling cost and piece price are too high” and that “none of the solutions represents an acceptable business case.” The solution GM ultimately settled for was to tell their dealers to ask Cobalt drivers to remove heavy objects from their key chains.

And yet, just a year later, GM decided to fix the ignition switch. In 2005, GM told their supplier, Delphi, to increase the torque in the ignition switch so the key wouldn’t move out of the run position and into accessory mode.

GM wasn’t alone in examining problems with the Cobalt. The lead government safety regulator, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, was also evaluating concerns with the Cobalt.

But NHTSA didn’t look at the ignition switch problem, just airbag non-deployment.

In 2007, three years after the Cobalt’s release, the chief of NHTSA’s Defects Assessment Division proposed that the agency investigate the Cobalt because he spotted a “pattern of non-deployments” in Cobalt airbags that didn’t exist with similar sedans.

An internal NHTSA presentation¹ noted a spike in warranty claims for Cobalt airbags: a total of 29 crashes causing 25 injuries and four deaths; and 14 field reports. Yet, NHTSA ultimately decided not to investigate. Even when the issue was again raised three years later, in 2010, NHTSA again passed on investigating.

GM was also looking into the airbag non-deployments. As early as 2007, GM started tracking incidents where Cobalt airbags didn’t deploy in car crashes. In 2011 and 2012, GM assigned at least two groups of engineers to examine the problem. According to GM’s public statements, it wasn’t until December 2013 that the company finally put the pieces together and linked the problems with the airbags with the faulty ignition switch — almost ten years after customers first told GM the Cobalt ignition switch didn’t work.

We know this: the red flags were there for GM and NHTSA to take action — but they didn’t.

Why didn’t GM and NHTSA put the pieces together for ten years? Why didn’t anyone ask the critically important questions?

Why did GM accept parts below their own company standards and specs?

When GM decided to get a new ignition switch for the Cobalt in 2006, did GM do so because they recognized that the faulty switch posed a safety problem?

¹ Office of NHTSA Defects Investigation panel to the Defects Assessment Division

Why did GM keep the old part number, leading to confusion?

When GM replaced the ignition switch, did engineers also consider how the faulty ignition impacted other systems in the car like the airbags?

Why did GM replace the ignition switch in new cars but not the older models?

Why did GM think a memo about the size of keychains was enough to solve a problem?

Why did NHTSA twice decide not to investigate the Cobalt?

Why didn't NHTSA make the link between the keys being in the accessory position and airbags not deploying? Did anyone ask why?

And for both GM and NHTSA: are people talking to one another? Do GM and NHTSA have a culture where people don't pass information up and down the chain of command?

To borrow a phrase, "what we have here is a failure to communicate" — and the results are deadly.

A failure to communicate both between and within GM and NHTSA.

Today we will ask what GM and NHTSA are doing — not just to fix the car — but to fix a culture within a business and government regulator that led to these problems. This is about restoring public trust — and giving the families of crash victims the truth about whether this tragedy could have been prevented and if future ones will be prevented.

It is my hope and expectation that today we will not hear a blame game or finger pointing. All the brilliant engineers and workers in the world won't matter if the people don't think you care. As the old saying goes: "People don't care that you know, until they know that you care."

This investigation is only three weeks old. We are determined to find the facts and identify the problems so a tragedy like this never happens again. This investigation is bipartisan and is a priority of all members on this committee.

I thank GM Chief Executive Officer Mary Barra and NHTSA Acting Administrator David Friedman for appearing before the committee today to answer our questions. I thank Ranking Members Waxman, DeGette and Dingell for working with us.

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