

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement
of
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce Chair Jan Schakowsky

Enhancing Vehicle Technology to Prevent Drunk Driving

March 14, 2019

As the Consumer Protection Subcommittee, we are committed to ensuring the safety of the American people. We have addressed a number of auto safety issues over the years—holding hearings on the Takata airbag defects and the GM ignition switch defect. We had a hearing last year on drugged driving, which has been on the rise in recent years.

We have not really addressed the number one cause of death on America’s roadways—drunk driving. More than 10,000 deaths—about 30 percent of all fatal crashes—are caused by drunk driving each year. That translates to almost 30 people dying in drunk-driving crashes every day or one person every 48 minutes in 2017. And that’s not counting the number of people who are seriously injured in drunk driving crashes.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) conducted a study in 2016 that found “alcohol was the largest contributor to crash risk.”

We all know drunk driving is a problem. But whether it’s because they are too intoxicated to make a reasonable decision, or they inaccurately estimate their level intoxication, people are still making the choice to drive drunk.

So today we are exploring some technologies that make it harder for people to make the wrong decision.

Currently, ignition interlocks are available for installation in cars on the road. These are devices that can detect levels of alcohol in a person’s system and if above the legal limit, will prevent a car from starting. Generally, this involves breathing into a tube and waiting for an analysis to be completed, which may take a little time. This tool has been effective in preventing individuals convicted of drunk driving from doing do again as long as the device is on his or her car.

All states have ignition interlock laws—some making it an optional condition after conviction, some requiring them for repeat offenders, and some requiring them for all offenders.

Often, people who have been convicted of driving under the influence of alcohol will still drive even if their license is suspended or taken. They still need to drive to get to work or run necessary errands. Interlock devices allow them to drive where they need to but stop them from putting themselves and others in danger by preventing them from driving drunk.

I look forward to hearing today whether expanded use of interlock devices can help lower the numbers of drunk driving crashes.

Today's interlock devices, however, are not enough. They are too intrusive for general usage. And that is why, NHTSA has been working with the auto industry to develop more integrated technology, known as Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety or DADSS, that can be deployed even more expansively.

I know my friend and colleague, Debbie Dingell will be recognized, but it should be noted that several of her constituents recently died in a tragic accident because of drunk driving. Debbie has introduced legislation aimed at curbing drunk driving, and so I thank her for her efforts to make roads safer. And stand with you as an ally in your fight.

NHTSA can and should be pressing automakers to develop and deploy this technology faster. Let's stop wasting time and start to take meaningful steps to turn back the tide on these tragedies.

Thank you. I now yield five minutes to the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee, Cathy McMorris Rodgers.