Statement of Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce
Hearing on "Summer Driving Dangers: Exploring Ways to Protect Drivers and Their Families"

May 23, 2019

This hearing is particularly timely, as the Memorial Day weekend is one of the busiest travel weekends of the year. Millions of Americans are taking to the nation's roads to travel to barbeques and beaches — including many heading to the Jersey shore. But this can be a dangerous weekend too. Nearly 350 people died in motor vehicle crashes over Memorial Day weekend in 2017. And as temperatures rise, so does the risk of heatstroke for children left in cars.

In 2017, more than 40,000 people died as a result of a motor vehicle accident, and 4.6 million were injured. And,

unfortunately, automobile fatalities are on the rise. Motor vehicle death rates have steeply increased since 2014, after nearly a decade of falling. It's a troubling trend suggesting that we need to double down on our efforts to improve the safety of our roadways.

Technologies exist that will vastly improve motor vehicle safety. We must find ways to get them in the hands of all drivers.

Take for example heatstroke victims in cars. One child's death is an extraordinary tragedy. Fifty-two is a crisis. Last year, 52 children died from heatstroke after being left in hot cars. Over the last 20 years, 802 children have been lost from these types of tragedies, and more than half of these deaths

occur when a distracted parent accidently leaves his or her child in a vehicle.

This is heartbreak Mr. Harrison knows all too well. Mr. Harrison, I am so sorry for your loss. I thank you for sharing your son's story in hopes that we can end these sorts of devastating accidents.

There are ways we can prevent kids from dying from vehicular heatstroke. Technologies alerting drivers to check their backseats for children exists today but has not been widely deployed. This crisis requires action. Just yesterday there was another tragic death in Florida when a baby girl died after being left in a day care van for several hours. And that's why I applaud Chairwoman Schakowsky and Congressman Ryan for their work on the HOT CARS Act—legislation that would

require vehicles to be equipped with safety technologies alerting drivers to check the rear seat after a car is turned off.

These and other existing safety technologies hold the promise of saving lives and reducing both the number and the severity of automobile crashes. Crash avoidance technologies like automatic emergency brakes, rear automatic braking, blind spot detection, and lane departure warnings are all proving to reduce crashes. Similarly, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimates that adaptive headlights—which automatically channel light around curves without causing glare for oncoming traffic—could help prevent up to 90 percent of nighttime curve crashes. These headlights are available overseas but are not legal in the United States.

Yet, NHTSA has not done much to require or even encourage automakers to make life-saving technologies

standard. If an automotive feature or technology proves it can save lives, it should not be a luxury reserved only for those who can afford to buy the highest end cars. These sorts of safety technologies should become as standard in our cars as seatbelts and airbags.

NHTSA is even failing at educating consumers and incentivizing manufacturers to adopt safety features. The New Car Assessment Program managed by NHTSA provides ratings on a scale from one to five stars for vehicle performance in crash and rollover tests. This 5-Star Safety Rating is supposed to be a tool that helps consumers make more informed decisions when purchasing their vehicles and encourages manufacturers to exceed minimum safety standards. But this safety seal has become a mere participation trophy. Ninety-nine percent of 2016 models received 4 or 5 stars, the highest ratings.

The very integrity and value of the 5-Star Safety Rating is undermined if the certification does not draw meaningful distinctions between the safety of different vehicles. It is also not meaningful if this safety certification fails to include crucial safety technologies already deployed on automobiles.

Unfortunately, the 5-Star Safety Rating does not account for advanced crash avoidance technologies, like forward collision warning, lane departure warning, and blind spot detection.

NHTSA started to update the program in 2015 but has yet to make needed changes. We must modernize the 5-Star Safety Rating for the 21st century automobile, so consumers can be

empowered to identify and purchase the safest car of their choosing.

I thank our witnesses for testifying this morning, and I look forward to the discussion.