

Statement of Joan Claybrook

Chair, Citizens for Reliable and Safe Highways (CRASH)

Good morning. My name is Joan Claybrook and I am the Chair of CRASH. I am also a former Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

On behalf of the CRASH Board, I want to extend our sincere appreciation to Natalie, Steve, Peter, Monica, Laurie, and Lee. Their courage in sharing their personal tragedies and working to implement solutions to prevent others from suffering the loss of a loved one in a truck crash is remarkable.

So much of the devastation, destruction, deaths and injuries that result from truck crashes are preventable. Yet, lawmakers continue to pander to special industry interests at the peril of our safety. This situation is contributing to long delays, repeated anti-safety attacks and outright dismissal of commonsense and overdue truck safety regulations. Truck crash deaths and injuries are climbing unabated while special trucking interests are in the driver's seat, pushing their agenda.

The major jump in truck fatalities is especially alarming when compared to what is happening in Europe. While we are experiencing more carnage caused by truck crashes, the European Union has been on a downward trend. According to the new report released today by the Truck Safety Coalition, between 2009 and 2014, truck crash deaths in the U.S. went up by 15 percent, while in the European Union they went down by nearly 25 percent.

The report also reveals that the EU has prioritized safety by requiring commonsense, cost-effective and available technologies on trucks to protect truck drivers and other road users. And, the proof is in the pudding – in the EU, the truck crash fatality rate per million population is 7.7, while in the U.S. it is 12.65. It is time for the U.S. to step our efforts and get serious about safety.

For instance, in 1989, the EU required side underride guards on truck trailers. This was decades before Laurie's son, Michael, was killed in a side underride collision. Despite years of advocacy and real world experience showing the lifesaving benefits of improved underride protections by family members like my fellow CRASH board member, Jennifer Tierney, there is still no mandatory requirement.

In 1992, the EU required large trucks to be equipped with speed limiters. Yet, in the U.S. ten years after that, Steve Owings' son Cullum was killed by a speeding trucker. Now, nearly 15 years after Cullum's death, a final rule requiring speed limiters still languishes at the U. S. Department of Transportation, also known as DOT, and more than 10,000 people have died in crashes involving speeding trucks.

In 1991 Congress mandated a rule for entry-level driver training for commercial motor vehicle drivers, and yet more than 25 years later, we still do not have a rule. In 2015, Peter, Monica and their sister Natalie were severely injured and their parents needlessly killed by a truck driver lacking the adequate training and skills to operate a big rig. DOT has dragged its feet and some segments of the trucking industry have abetted in that delay despite repeated lawsuits by safety organizations demanding that a sufficient rule be issued by DOT in a timely manner. Even worse, the rule about to be issued by the DOT does not include a minimum number of behind-the-wheel training hours. In contrast, the EU required entry-level driver training, with a minimum of 20 hours behind the wheel, in 2003. It seems like such a basic notion and essential safety prerequisite to require minimum hours of behind the wheel training before getting behind the wheel of a massive 80,000 lbs. truck to drive at high speeds on our roads.

Most recently, in 2012, the EU required large trucks to be equipped with automatic emergency braking. DOT, however, shows no signs of requiring this proven and effective technology on trucks. In 2015, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration granted a petition for such a rulemaking filed by the Truck Safety Coalition, Road Safe America, Advocates for Auto and Highway Safety, and Center for Auto Safety. Yet, 2 years later there has been no action at all. Each day of delay in requiring this lifesaving technology, more people, such as Natalie's husband Brian, are killed in preventable truck crashes.

All of these safety technologies are available, affordable and already standard equipment on trucks in other countries. They are saving lives and saving money for trucking companies and the public. It is time for Congress and the DOT to act now. No more outrageous excuses. We can no longer allow special trucking interests to subvert safety by having their friends in Congress rollback safety rules, increase truck size and weights, and ignore the truck safety crisis on our roads and highways. Congress should direct U.S. DOT officials to take action and issue these overdue rules.

The problems are clear, but so are the solutions. We need our nation's leaders to stand up for the public and stand firm against special trucking industry attacks on safety. Every day of delay means another day of needless deaths, unimaginable grief for families like those here with us today, and unacceptable voids in federal safety protections for the public. Thank you.