CTS researchers serve as resource to Texas legislators and staff

Texas legislators and their staffs often reach out to researchers at TTI for a wide variety of needs. The 2011 Legislative Session was particularly active for staff of the Center for Transportation Safety, as lawmakers addressed numerous issues related to roadway safety.

Research Scientist Melissa Walden and Associate Research Scientist Troy Walden met with staff members from the offices of State Sen. Steve Ogden and State Sen. Dan Patrick to review a variety of issues related to driving while intoxicated. Eventually, one bill authored by each senator was passed:

- Senate Bill 364, by Sen. Ogden, which will require the Texas Department of Public Safety to produce an annual report on DWI prosecutions in Texas.
- Senate Bill 1787, by Sen. Patrick, which will require peace officers requesting a specimen to inform the person that if they refuse, the officer may request a warrant to take the specimen from the person.

A third bill that was passed, by Rep. Pete Gallego, will make intoxication assault a 2nd degree felony (instead of a 3rd degree felony under current law), if the assault places the victim “in a persistent vegetative state.”

All three laws take effect on September 1.

Lawmakers filed a total of 36 bills addressing the DWI problem in Texas, addressing fines, ignition interlock...
CTS researchers serve as resource to legislators and staff

FROM THE COVER

devices, blood alcohol concentration testing, and a number of other considerations. When one of those ignition interlock bills came up for a public hearing, Melissa Walden was invited to testify before the House Committee on Criminal Jurisprudence in March, where she illustrated how ignition interlocks have been a successful countermeasure in other states.

“Texas has one of the most serious impaired driving problems in the nation, and our state’s leaders are certainly devoting a lot of attention to it,” Walden says. “We’re honored to assist the Legislature with something so important as this.”

The bill on which Walden testified, House Bill 189 by State Rep. Todd Smith, was passed by the House of Representatives but was not taken up by the Senate in the limited time that remained in the session.

Legislators have also devoted attention to the problem of distracted driving, introducing a total of 16 bills designed to further regulate the practice of texting and talking on cell phones while driving. And when a bill to outlaw texting at the wheel came up for consideration in March, Assistant Research Scientist Joel Cooper was called upon for invited testimony, in which he outlined the current state of knowledge based on distracted driving research.

“Texting while driving, as a specific field of research, is still quite new, but we are in fact learning more and more about how dangerous it can be and what countermeasures might be most effective.” Cooper says. “Anytime we can share our knowledge with policy makers, we believe we’re providing a valuable public service.”

House Bill 242, authored by State Rep. Tom Craddick, would have prohibited sending or receiving text messages and e-mail except in cases of emergency. The proposed legislation passed both the House and Senate but was later vetoed by Governor Rick Perry.

In addition to formal testimony, CTS researchers prepared briefing papers on the DWI and distracted driving issues in response to legislative staff requests.

Researchers also prepared a briefing paper on the subject of speed limits at the request of legislative staff. Legislators eventually passed a new law that raises the speed limit in Texas to 75 miles per hour on most rural roads and eliminates the lower nighttime limits, and also approved a provision that allows an 85 mile per hour limit on certain new roads in the state. In each case, engineering studies will be required before the higher limits can take effect.
Safety conference fuels lifesaving passion

We’re All in this Together - 2011 Traffic Safety Conference Theme

Despite a substantial decline in Texas traffic deaths in the last two years, safety experts are in no danger of growing complacent.

Instead, for those attending and speaking at the 2011 Traffic Safety Conference in Austin, March 21-23 — hosted by the Texas Transportation Institute’s (TTIs) Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) — the progress seems to have ignited an enthusiasm for saving even more lives.

First, some background.

There was an 11 percent drop in Texas fatalities in 2009 from the year before and a 19 percent decline since 2003. Preliminary figures for 2010 point to a further decline. It’s impressive, especially considering the dramatic Texas population increase and the many more collective miles being driven.

“The Texas fatality rate is now at the lowest level since the state began calculating fatality rates in 1935,” Director Terry Pence of TxDOT’s Traffic Safety Section told the crowd as he highlighted various reasons for the drop. “Almost 94 percent of Texans are buckling up every time they drive.” He also credited safer roads and vehicles, public safety campaigns and people driving less because of the economy and higher gas prices.

Janice Brown, the Texas Administrator for the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), gave credit to the state’s $1.2 billion bond program for improving safety. “These investments are paying off,” she said.

But, both Brown and Pence were quick to point out that more than 3 thousand people are still dying each year on Texas roadways.

They offered up these fatality statistics:

• Texas has the second highest number of fatalities in the nation
• Speed was a factor in 40 percent of the deaths
• Texas ranks 3rd in the number of pedestrian fatalities
• Roadway departures account for 53 percent of the fatalities
• Alcohol was a factor in almost 40 percent of the deaths

“Every single one of our crashes where someone dies is avoidable and preventable,” Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo told the opening session of the Traffic Safety Conference, “Rarely is it a mechanical failure. The majority of time it’s about behavior.”

During his bold and compelling presentation, Acevedo offered no apologies for aggressively trying to change the driving culture through law enforcement.

In fact, changing driving behaviors in order to improve safety seemed to be the underlying theme of the two-day conference, attended by 200 people.

The breakout sessions covered the entire spectrum of traffic safety with topics involving pedestrians, teen and elderly drivers, work zone and motorcycle safety use, freight operations and child passenger occupant protection. Other issues that were covered included enhancing prosecution of DWI, speed management, safety belts and distracted driving.

“Let’s face it,” FHWA’s Brown said, “Some people still think you can safely talk on your cell phone or send a text. The truth is you simply can’t.”

Early research on driver distraction seems to back up the statement. In the conference session devoted entirely to the issue, details of a Virginia Tech 100 car driving study were presented by Research Scientist Charlie Klauer. In it,
Safety conference fuels lifesaving passion

Continued

42,000 hours of data collection was studied, including videos of 69 real-time crashes and 731 near crashes.

“Anytime the eyes are off the road for two seconds, it increases crash risk by two times that of an alert driver,” Klauer said. And the figures are worse for young motorists. “Drivers aged 18 to 20 were four times more likely to be involved in an inattention crash then any other group.”

Another researcher speaking during the session was Joel Cooper of TTI, who pointed to the enormous toll that inattention has on safety. “Twenty percent of (the national) injury crashes in 2009 involved driver distraction, representing 5,474 deaths that same year,” he said. “I believe this is an understatement, but still the number is pretty staggering.”

During the conference, researchers, law enforcement officers, traffic safety experts and others agreed that changing the culture is necessary in order to change behavior. They acknowledged it will be a time consuming, difficult process.

“Before, it was cool to have your cell phone in the car,” TxDOT Media Relations Officer Kelli Petras said during the closing session. “It was cool to always be connected and now we are trying to change that attitude back into ‘it’s dangerous…you can cause an accident.’”

Petras was part of a round table discussion that was designed to get other

Notable Quotes

“As we continue to have growth in the state — especially in the metropolitan and suburban areas — traffic safety is about as important as anything we’ve got going. We have to have clean air and clean water, but we have to have mobility and we have to have it in a safe way.” — David Cain, David Cain Consulting.

“The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has indicated that if all passengers wore seat belts, another 3700 lives could have been saved in 2009.” — Terry Pence, TxDOT

“If you do innovative things, it can change the culture. That’s what’s going to make the difference. We have to find ways to change the culture through education.” — Craig Cannon, Austin Police Department

“We know that in 2009, 40 percent of Texas fatalities were involved in speed related crashes.” — Janice Brown, Federal Highway Administration

“Texas and other states are taking on the vision statement of Toward Zero Deaths, something you will be hearing much more about in the months ahead.” — Terry Pence, TxDOT

“Drunks don’t discriminate. They don’t care if you are white, black, male, female, rich or poor. They kill us all.” — Art Acevedo, Austin Police Chief
Safety conference fuels lifesaving passion

Continued

perspectives about traffic safety. She was joined by former Texas State Representative and Senator David Cain, National President of Mothers Against Drunk Driving Laura Dean-Mooney, CEO of EnviroMedia Social Marketing Valerie Davis and Associated Press Reporter Jim Vertuno.

At the conclusion of the conference, CTS Director John Mounce thanked the closing session round-table members. He borrowed a line from the luncheon speaker, Bella Dinh-Zarr, as he urged unity in the effort to change driver behavior in Texas.

“If you want to act quickly, act alone. If you want to go far, act together,” Mounce told the crowd. “We’ve got a great distance to go, but together we are going to get there. We are going to save some lives, and that’s what we are here for.”

Pictured right: Center for Transportation Safety’s Dr. Joel Cooper, gives a presentation on the risks of driver distraction during the session on distracted driving at the 2011 Traffic Safety Conference.

Decade of action underway around the globe

With more than 3,000 Texas fatalities each year and 37,000 deaths in the United States, it’s a much larger number worldwide...1.3 million. And 50 million people are seriously injured every year.

Bella Dinh-Zarr, Road Safety Director of the FIA Foundation, calls injuries and deaths from traffic crashes a silent epidemic. She was the luncheon speaker for the 2011 Traffic Safety Conference.

“By 2030, traffic crashes will actually surpass malaria and tuberculosis as a leading cause of death worldwide,” she told attendees. “Think about this. More people will die on the road than will die of HIV Aids.”

Dinh-Zarr, who is also the North American Director of the Make Roads Safe Campaign for Global Road Safety, told the conference about the Decade of Action for Road Safety, a United Nations proclamation that makes traffic crashes an international priority.

She urged those attending the conference to get involved in the campaign, which begins May 11 and lasts until 2020.

“This is a very exciting time for traffic safety worldwide. For the first time, the United Nations has named traffic safety as an international priority on the same scale as HIV Aids and malaria.”

For more information, visit http://www.decadeofaction.org/.

The conference included a lunch session on the UN Decade of Action for Road Safety, from Dr. Bella Dinh-Zarr, Road Safety Director, FIA Foundation and North American Director, Make Roads Safe Campaign for Global Road Safety.
Acevedo stirs conference with bold presentation

Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo held little back when he spoke during the Opening Session of the 2011 Traffic Safety Conference. Attendees laughed, gasped and applauded the chief’s aggressive stance on traffic safety.

“How many of you heard that when you hit the city limits in Austin, Texas on I-35, you better slow down,” Acevedo asked the audience in regard to the city’s reputation for being a speed trap. “Is that a good thing when it comes to making sure people get home safely to their families? It’s a good thing,” he said. “Don’t let anybody convince you otherwise.”

When Acevedo came to Austin in 2007 for the chief’s job via the California Highway Patrol, he was surprised to learn of Texan’s attitude about drinking and driving, and that there was no law (at that time) requiring rear seat passengers to wear a seat belt. Since then, he’s set out to change the culture.

“We’ve got to change that mentality because too many people are dying in our state. The only way we are going to change behavior is if we are aggressive,” Acevedo said, criticizing those who think police should not be able to order DWI suspects to give their blood. “It’s real simple. Get drunk and get behind the wheel and you will never have to worry about a police officer drawing your blood. I’ve got news for you. When you break the law, there are consequences.”

The chief admitted his frustration with the criminal justice system for, as he put it, “looking the other way” in its prosecution of impaired drivers. “They don’t take traffic safety seriously at the courts sometimes. It’s a battle for us,” Acevedo said. “If [drunk drivers] don’t learn from their mistakes, we should treat them as repeat offenders.”

He urged the state to approve DWI checkpoint legislation, the aggressive enforcement of seatbelt laws and the vigorous prosecution of drivers who kill people.

“Every one of these lives that is taken from us is a life that was taken without excuse or justification. It will never become a priority until you feel the pain,” he said. “We feel that pain.”
Above: Conference attendees mingle at the conference reception and exhibitor showcase at the 2011 Traffic Safety Conference. Right: TX-DOT Government and Public Affairs Division; David Cain, Former Texas State Representative and Senator, President of David Cain Consulting at the closing session of the Conference. Below right: Commander Jason Dusterhoft of the Austin Police Department gives a presentation during the session on Austin’s Highway Enforcement Command. Below: Center for Transportation Safety Director Dr. John Mounce; Road Safety Director, FIA Foundation and North American Director, Make Roads Safe Campaign for Global Road Safety Dr. Bella Dinh-Zarr; and Laura Dean-Mooney, National President, MADD, pose for a picture after the lunch session.
TDS expanding in North Carolina, Connecticut

Even as the Teens in the Driver Seat program continues its expansion across Texas, new schools in other states are following the Lone Star State’s lead.

With support from the Governor’s Highway Safety Program in North Carolina, Johnston County launched its Teens in the Driver Seat program in February. Teenagers are involved directly in developing and delivering driving safety messages at all 10 county high schools. Their goal is to raise awareness of the top driving dangers for teens and prevent crashes involving young drivers. Teens made their announcement of the program at a press conference, where they outlined their plans after pointing out just how severe the problem is in their part of North Carolina. From 2006 to 2010, Johnston County saw 32 teenage drivers killed in motor vehicle crashes, ranking second in the state. Only Wake County, which has more than five times the population of Johnston, had more teen crash deaths.

In the northeast, United Way of West Central Connecticut helped to advance the cause of teen driver safety with a forum held in April at Terryville High School. About 100 students from several high schools in the area attended the forum, where they had a chance to learn how TDS works. TDS actually got its start in Connecticut two years ago, when Bristol Eastern High School and Bristol Central High School became the first schools in New England to launch the program.

The students also heard from Lauren Roberge, a local teenager who told her story about how texting and driving can produce tragic results, as it did for her when she crashed and barely survived, requiring a long hospital stay and numerous surgeries to allow her to walk once again.

Rockdale County High School in Conyers, Georgia became the newest school in that state to start TDS when they announced the program at a press conference in March. Among the first activities conducted by the students was a safe driving pledge, signed by nearly all students in the school. In addition, the students participated in a survey of risk awareness and driving behavior. In the survey, they discovered that although nighttime driving is the most common danger, most students didn’t know it was such a risk. Only 3 percent of teens surveyed were aware of the danger, but 25 percent said they often drive late at night. Most students also know talking or texting on a cell phone while driving is dangerous, but one in five say they do it anyway.

In announcing the program, group leader Julian Hinds pointed out why the peer-to-peer approach is so important. “When you constantly hear adults or an older person, you tend to tune it out,” he said. “We’re telling each other as friends and classmates ... and I think it’s going to pay off.”