Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Dr. Melissa Walden, and I represent the Center for Transportation Safety at the Texas Transportation Institute. Thank you for inviting me here today to share some of what we know about the use of ignition interlock devices, and how they are used to address the problem of driving while intoxicated. That problem is particularly serious in Texas, underscored by the fact that some 40 percent of fatally injured drivers in 2009 were intoxicated when they crashed.

For those not familiar with them, an ignition interlock device is an electro-mechanical device installed in a vehicle’s dashboard. Before a driver can start the vehicle, he or she must first exhale into the device’s mouthpiece to ensure that his or her breath alcohol concentration is below the pre-set fail level of 0.03 for Texas. If the device records a failure then the engine will not start. Additionally, the device will ask for a breath sample at random times after the engine has been started.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends ignition interlocks as an effective countermeasure for motor-vehicle injury prevention based on evidence presented in peer-reviewed research. In short, this is what the research tells us:

- When interlocks were installed, re-arrest rates decreased by more than 60 percent relative to comparison groups.
• Drivers with interlocks installed had fewer alcohol-related crashes than those who had licenses suspended for an alcohol-impaired driving conviction.
• Ignition interlock programs are effective in reducing DWI recidivism by as much as 74 percent.
• When interlocks were removed, re-arrest rates reverted to rates similar to those of persons convicted of alcohol-impaired driving who had not used interlocks.
• One study indicated that 82 percent of users believed ignition interlock devices were a very effective way to prevent drinking and driving and 68 percent believed it changed their drinking behavior.
• In addition to being effective, this strategy enjoys public support, with more than 60 percent of Texas drivers supporting the use of interlocks, according to a TTI study completed in the fall.

Ignition interlocks represent an effective countermeasure to address the DWI problem. But as with all other countermeasures, this strategy raises concerns that all parties agree will merit ongoing consideration. These include: oversight of the driver’s performance, the availability of vendor service centers where the devices can be calibrated and maintained, and the need for accurate and complete data to allow evaluations to ensure the effectiveness of interlock device programs.

Ignition interlocks can help reduce the number of alcohol-related crashes and fatalities, but their success depends on certain conditions. Prosecutors and judicial personnel need to understand how the devices work to ensure that monitoring driver performance is part of a sentencing plan. Probation personnel must be
trained to analyze reports provided by the interlock vendors in order to provide effective feedback to the court. Finally, law enforcement officers need to have a way of knowing if a driver is only allowed to operate a vehicle if it is equipped with an interlock device.

The traffic safety community recognizes the value of this and other DWI countermeasures, but there is also a growing recognition that laws alone will not bring about sufficient improvements. To see continued and meaningful improvement, it’s necessary to change the way that we, as a society, think about driving – to change our traffic safety culture. Part of that will depend upon the social influence that has made impaired driving much less socially acceptable than it once was. Laws are essential, but if you have social pressure and cultural change to reinforce those laws, you have a very effective one-two punch.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.