Testimony for Senate Transportation & Homeland Security Committee – March 16, 2011

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Dr. Joel Cooper, 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 problem of texting while driving. What I have to offer is based upon research conducted at a number of universities and agencies in recent years, some of it comes from research that I have personally been involved in, and some of it is from the work of my colleagues at other institutions.

As you are all aware, communication technology changes at an astounding pace. With respect to texting, it is estimated that 57.2 billion text messages were sent between June of 2004 and June of 2005. By June of 2010, that number had increased by 3,100% to nearly 1.8 trillion. Although the precise figures are not known, a substantial percentage of those text messages were no doubt sent and/or read, from within a vehicle. The result is that an estimated 16,000 people have died in crashes in which a driver was texting. Although surprisingly little research has investigated this topic, one major study suggests that the odds of a collision are increased by 23 times when texting. This compares to 1.3 to 4 times for just talking and 10 times for driving with a blood alcohol concentration of .08. If we use alcohol as the benchmark, a rough comparison suggests that texting is equivalent to driving with a BAC level of just over .10 – 25% greater than the legal limit in Texas. Perhaps because of this profound impairment, public opinion appears to strongly support text messaging bans while driving. Indeed, a Nationwide Insurance survey in 2009 indicate that 80% of respondents were in favor of a full ban on texting while driving, while a Rasmussen report that same year puts the figure at 91%.

Texting while driving is the “perfect storm” of cognitive, visual, and manual distraction. You have to think about it, you have to look away from the road, and you have to take your hands away from the wheel. Although technology exists to alter the way in which text messages are sent and received, they are most commonly typed, letter by letter, into a phone; requiring visual confirmation of each key press, word, and sentence. This task combination can result in significant loss of vehicle control. The research is very clear on this. In addition, texting while driving is associated with an average eyes-off-road time of 4.6 seconds. At 70mph, that’s a distance of one and a half football fields.

We know that texting and driving is dangerous. Something else that we know is that a multifaceted approach can be the most effective and productive way to deal with the problem. Law enforcement is essential, of course. But to bring about continued and meaningful change, it’s necessary to change the way that we, as a society, think about driving – to change our traffic safety culture. We can point to drunk driving as an example. Stricter laws were put in place years ago, and those laws helped reduce the number of alcohol-related crashes. But something else happened, too. Over the years, drunk driving simply became more and more socially unacceptable. Whether we’re talking about drunk driving or texting and driving, we can be sure of this: 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.