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ICC Explores Rail Safety Strategies to Protect Motorists & Pedestrians

Chicago, IL....The Illinois Commerce Commission recently held a Rail Safety Summit to explore potential strategies to reduce the number of pedestrians and motorists injured or killed in incidents involving railroads. In addition to an overview of current railroad engineering, education, and enforcement strategies, panelists discussed a variety of techniques used to educate the public concerning the risks of railroad trespassing and strategies to increase compliance with applicable laws.

“About 70 people are fatally injured in train collisions each year in Illinois. Approximately two-thirds of such incidents are due to people trespassing in the railroad right-of-way, the remaining one-third occur at rail crossings when warning signs and signals are either ignored or not observed,” said ICC Rail Safety Program Administrator Mike Stead. “Experts in the railroad industry, law enforcement, and public safety advocacy groups came together to discuss ways to prevent further loss of life.”

The first panel titled: “The Challenge of Pedestrian Safety/Trespass Prevention” addressed pedestrian safety at grade crossings, and how to reduce trespassing on railroad rights-of-way. DuPage County Coroner Dr. Richard Jorgensen reported that of the 10,540 deaths in DuPage County in 2016- 2017, 13 were rail-related, 11 of them suicides. Paul Piekarski with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers said that suicides and other rail accidents also impact the mental health of rail engineers who must deal with incidents long after they occur. Metra Chairman Norman Carlson noted that Metra is providing mental health awareness training to employees to help identify individuals in distress and getting them the care they need. In 2017, Metra employees relying on their training intervened and were successful in bringing 51 individuals to safety. Metra is partnering with mental health organizations to prevent suicides and encouraged others to do the same.

The second panel titled: “Pedestrian Safety at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings” focused on engineering solutions and personal testimony. In his presentation, Adrian Guerrero, Director of Public Affairs for Union Pacific Railroad, said UP working with Metra recently completed extensive rail crossing

improvements to the UP-West Line, including complete pedestrian gate coverage, “another train” warning systems, and the addition of fencing between the tracks.

IDOT’s Elliot Ramos provided an update on the Chicago- St. Louis High Speed Rail (HSR) corridor project. He said the focus of the design and construction of the project has been on safety. “In total, 80 grade crossings have received pedestrian safety improvements such as pedestrian gates and escape areas with crossing exit gates.”

Sergeant Derek Zook from the Naperville Police Department highlighted the importance of police patrols, mental health training for police officers and the enforcement of laws.

Dr. Lanny Wilson lauded the achievements of everyone involved in improving rail crossing safety, but suggested a new approach. "It is time for a paradigm shift! Historically, the rail industry targeted public safety resources to the points where highways and railroads intersect (highway-rail grade crossings) because that was where the majority of deaths took place. This allocation of resources has proven to be very successful. There are now 1/3 the number of deaths at highway-rail grade crossings as the year my daughter died at a railroad crossing - 1994. Today, the majority of railroad deaths (72%) involve people trespassing along railways - not at the crossings. We must shift our focus and target this problem with the same collaborative spirit," said Wilson.

The third panel was titled “Trespass Prevention – What Can We Do?” A presentation by Scott Gabree, Ph.D., Engineering Psychologist with Volpe Center highlighted new technologies available to detect trespassers and successful signage campaigns being used across the country to prevent suicides. The ICC’s Chip Pew spoke about the ongoing effort and techniques being used to educate the public through Operation Lifesaver, and Highland Park Police Chief Lou Jogmen touted the efforts of Rail Safety Week in Illinois to raise awareness about the problem, and the efforts of law enforcement agencies to continually work to improve all aspects of rail safety. “Officers receive enhanced training, are renewing their focus on trespassing violations and are developing partnerships within their respective communities aimed at addressing this important safety issue,” said Jogmen.

“Too many lives are lost on our railways each year, and most of these deaths were preventable. Today’s discussion shed light on the challenges of improving safety for pedestrians at highway-rail grade crossings, reducing trespassing on railroad rights-of-way, and finding new ways to address mental health and suicide prevention,” said Commissioner John Rosales. “Rail safety has too often taken a backseat to other areas, such as driving safety, and I believe the culture needs to change in approaching rail lines and grade crossings, whether on foot or behind the wheel. Working together we can make a concerted effort to address these important safety issues.”

The agenda, biographical information about the speakers and their presentations are available on the ICC website by clicking [here](#).

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About the Illinois Commerce Commission

The Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC) is a quasi-judicial body made up of five Commissioners. Through its Public Utility Program, the Commission oversees the provision of adequate, reliable, efficient and safe utility services at the least possible cost to Illinois citizens served by

electric, natural gas, telecommunications, water and sewer public utility companies. Through its Transportation Regulatory Program, the Commission oversees public safety and consumer protection programs with regard to intrastate commercial motor carriers of general freight, household goods movers, relocation towers, safety towers, personal property warehouses and repossession agencies. The Commission's Rail Safety Program also inspects and regulates the general safety of railroad tracks, facilities and equipment in the state.

To learn more about the Commission, its offices and bureaus, click [here](#). If you are a consumer who needs help resolving a utility dispute call 800-524-0795 or file an online complaint [here](#). For a complaint related to transportation, call 217-782-6448.

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Additional Quotes from Rail Safety Summit Participants & Statistical Information

Union Pacific is one of the largest railroads in Illinois and the country. Adrian Guerrero said, Union Pacific is continuously looking for innovative approaches to enhance safety in the communities they operate. "Finding effective solutions requires collaboration between several Union Pacific teams and community leaders.

"HSR Program pedestrian safety improvements minimize pedestrian trespassing, maintain safe connectivity, and provide safe locations for pedestrians to cross the track. In total, 80 grade crossings have received pedestrian safety improvements such as pedestrian gates and escape areas with crossing exit gates," said Elliot Ramos, Illinois Department of Transportation.

- Illinois is one of the key transportation hubs in the nation.
- About one-third of all rail traffic passes through Illinois.
- Illinois ranks number 1 nationally in terms of the number of rail carloads originated in 2015 with 4,935,600 carloads according to the Association of American Railroads.
- Illinois ranks second in the number of rail route miles with approximately 7,486 miles, including the nation's largest rail freight hub in Chicago.
- Texas is number one with 9,916 miles of rail route miles.
- 53 freight railroads operate in Illinois, including all 7 of the Class I carriers (largest freight railroads) in the country as well as one of the largest commuter railroads, Metra.
- Currently, there are 7,615 highway-rail *grade* crossings and 320 pedestrian-rail grade crossings in Illinois, only Texas has more.
- Illinois has the nation's third largest highway system, with 146,958 miles of highways, streets and roads. Both the rail and highway systems are among the most heavily used in the nation in terms of volume of traffic, with much of the traffic concentrated in the Chicago metropolitan region.
- Despite these facts, over the past 5 years Illinois has experienced a decrease in the number of train-vehicle & train-pedestrian incidents occurring in Illinois have gone down, compared to the rest of the nation.