



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**National Highway
Traffic Safety
Administration**



Traffic Tech

TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER SERIES

DOT HS 813 538

April 2024

Nighttime Seat Belt Enforcement: A How-To Guide and Case Study Summary

Background

Nighttime Seat Belt Enforcement (NTSBE) efforts have the potential to increase nighttime seat belt use, but they are also subject to challenges involving the detection of seat belt use due to low visibility, roadside safety of officers, and resource allocation. States with secondary enforcement laws encounter significant issues in NTSBE because officers must stop vehicles on different primary violations to issue seat belt citations. NHTSA seeks to provide law enforcement agencies (LEAs) with tools to help successfully plan and execute these types of initiatives in their jurisdictions. The research team developed case studies and a how-to guide to address the challenges and describe best practices for NTSBE efforts. The project incorporated procedural justice and equitable processes in nighttime seat belt enforcement.

Methodology

The research team identified four States that had experience in NTSBE: Georgia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Washington. The research team facilitated conversations with stakeholders in each State to support the development of case studies and the how-to guide. The discussion protocol focused on the following types of information.

- Reasons for initiating and maintaining NTSBE efforts (if those efforts are still active) and reasons NTSBE efforts were ended.
- Funding mechanisms for NTSBE and how requirements around funding influenced localities participation in NTSBE.
- Enforcement strategies and tactics used for implementing NTSBE.
- Degree to which NTSBE was conducted as a standalone enforcement initiative or integrated into other enforcement efforts, or both.
- Public information and education and community engagement efforts to raise awareness and enable NTSBE.
- Formal and informal process and policies implemented to embed NTSBE into LEAs.
- Training and other efforts to prepare LEAs and law enforcement officers (LEOs) to implement NTSBE.
- Methods related to observing and documenting seat belt use/non-use by officers.
- Roles of different LEA staff (e.g., command, officers, public information officer).
- Timing of information-gathering and reporting.
- Examples of perceived NTSBE successes or missed opportunities.

The research team used thematic analysis to assess and synthesize the information provided by States. The how-to guide was derived from these activities providing step-by-step practices for LEAs to consider. These include

laying a strong foundation for success, identifying enforcement tactics, planning and implementation, communications and outreach, and evaluation of NTSBE efforts. Highlights from the four case study States are provided here.

Georgia

Georgia is a primary seat belt law State. The Georgia Governor's Office of Highway Safety (GOHS) encourages multi-agency coordination to support integrated enforcement in four areas: seat belts, impaired driving, speeding, and distracted driving. GOHS has strongly encouraged police departments to conduct 24/7 seat belt enforcement. NTSBE details are a requirement for grant funding, and the State provides additional support through personnel, vehicles, and equipment. For NTSBE operations, Georgia enforcement agencies primarily employ spotters who call out violators to waiting officers stationed farther down the road. They also use check points for impaired driving, which also focus on seat belt enforcement, combined with saturation patrols. They will often disperse officers around a check point area to catch drivers trying to avoid the check point. GOHS provided each of their Law Enforcement Liaisons (LELs) with generators and balloon lights, to illuminate roadways without blinding drivers. This equipment is also used at impaired-driving checkpoints.

Maryland

Maryland is a primary seat belt law State. Maryland began conducting NTSBE in 2011 under a NHTSA research grant and has developed trainings and operations procedures to support police departments in this enforcement effort. An important NTSBE tactic that Maryland uses is channelization as part of its safety enforcement zone efforts. Channelizations began as part of an effort to develop an NTSBE technique that would not unduly affect the motoring public unless they were violating the law. Crash data is used to identify where to set up checkpoints and locations. The flow of traffic is filtered down to one lane using traffic cones. Traffic will naturally slow down when lanes are reduced which allows an observation officer (or spotter) to see violations and pull over vehicles more easily. The spotter is positioned near the beginning of the taper to look for violations. The spotter radios violations ahead and officers direct drivers with violations out of the traffic flow. Drivers with no violations observed can keep driving. Maryland also uses saturation patrols but considers them not as successful as channelizations in catching NTSBE violations.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is a secondary seat belt law State, which affects how NTSBE is conducted. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation champions NTSBE and requires grantees to conduct 50 percent of seat belt enforcement at night. The Highway Safety Network provides technical support through LELs. Pennsylvania law enforcement primarily addresses NTSBE enforcement through impaired driving checkpoints and with roving/saturation patrols. Seat belt enforcement is often supplemental to impaired driving enforcement or speeding enforcement. LEAs set up traffic enforcement zones that concentrate on small areas of roadway that have been identified by crash data.

Washington

Washington is a primary seat belt law State. The Washington Traffic Safety Commission (WTSC) matches every dollar spent on enforcement with a dollar spent on public education. When the WTSC launched an NTSBE project, it promoted high visibility with a large publicity campaign of earned and paid media.

Washington's NTSBE initiative was developed by the Washington State Patrol and, at its high point, involved as many as 75 State, county, and local LEAs. NTSBE operations typically involved coordinated enforcement efforts of two to six officers. One officer acted as the spotter or observer and would call ahead to stop vehicles to identify unbuckled motorists. Spotters parked at intersections with their headlights aimed across the intersections. Spotters also positioned their patrol cars at the top of expressway off ramps where vehicle speeds were reduced, and violations were more visible. Stopped vehicles were positioned at the bottom of the ramps.

Discussion

While the States' NTSBE programs were quite different, there were some important commonalities related to how data informed when and where NTSBE operations should be implemented, how seat belt enforcement was integrated with other safety priorities, how operations were coordinated collaboratively across LEAs, and how operations were communicated.

Data Driven Enforcement

Like any traffic safety initiative, NTSBE should be driven by crash data. Almost every State has relatively sophisticated crash databases available to identify when and where enforcement should be directed. These case studies highlight how States use data to inform where enforcement efforts should focus and when they could maximize their impact. Public support for NTSBE is positively affected by demonstrating a need for that enforcement and focusing those efforts in locations where they are most needed and allows scarce law enforcement resources to go where the data shows it is needed most.

Integrated Enforcement Programs

All four case study States recognized the connection between impaired driving, speeding, and seat belt nonuse, often targeting all three when conducting NTSBE. Integrating their enforcement efforts allowed officers to maximize funding and scarce law enforcement personnel resources. For example, check points (where permitted) for nighttime impaired driving enforcement provide significant opportunities for seat belt enforcement in primary and secondary States.

Cooperative Enforcement Strategies

A significant obstacle for any traffic safety enforcement initiative, including NTSBE, is staffing. Some of the tactics described in these case studies involve staffing levels that may be beyond that available to many smaller LEAs, if they work alone. The case studies highlight how law enforcement maximized their capacity to enforce seat belt laws by staffing multi-agency enforcement teams by leveraging partnerships with State Highway Safety Offices, local and county law enforcement agencies, and State Highway Patrols.

Communication and Outreach

One important component of NTSBE is letting the public know what will be happening. Equitable sharing of information about the nighttime enforcement plans through press releases and other social media channels offers an opportunity to raise awareness and provide education about the importance of wearing seat belts.

Trial and Error

The case study States emphasized the need to be flexible and try several different approaches. It took time to figure out tactics that worked best, timeframe for operations, productive intersections with the right flow of traffic (not too high or too low), the best way to maximize lighting, and the right ratio of observing officer to chase vehicles for the traffic volumes involved.

How to Order

The guide and case studies, *Nighttime Seat Belt Enforcement: A How-To Guide* (Report No. DOT HS 813 537), can be downloaded at <https://rosap.ntl.bts.gov/view/dot/73789>. Janice Hartwill-Miller was the task order manager for this project.

Suggested APA Citation for This Document:

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2024, March). *Nighttime seat belt enforcement: A how-to guide and case study summary* (Traffic Tech Technology Transfer Series. Report No. DOT HS 813 538).



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