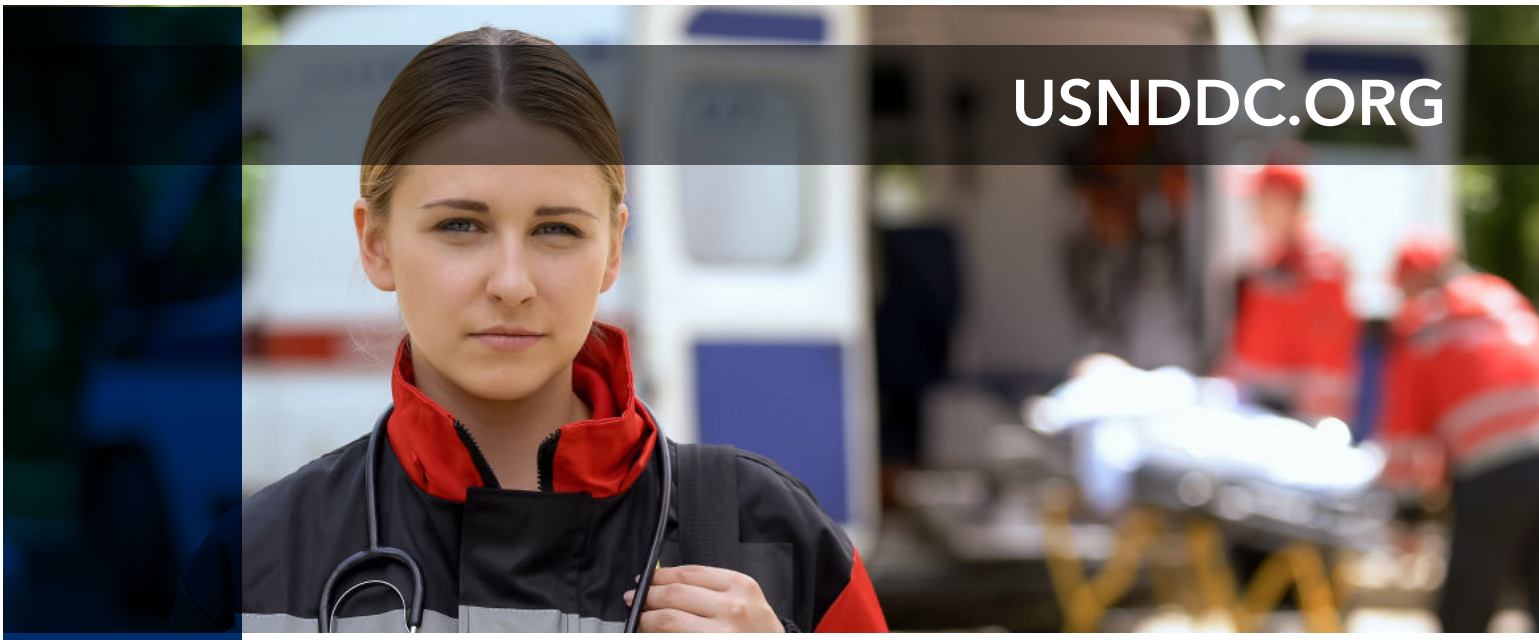
NATIONAL DISTRACTED DRIVING COALITION

Emergency Responder Struck-By Events

Magnitude, Risks & the Need for Action

November 2026



The workplace of emergency responders is one of the most dangerous environments in the nation: the roadway. Every day, police, firefighters, emergency medical services personnel, tow operators, highway service patrols, and roadway workers perform duties just feet from a steady stream of fast-moving vehicles while delivering lifesaving services, protecting crash scenes and helping stranded motorists.

As evidence of the risk to these professionals, struck-by incidents continue to cause preventable deaths, catastrophic injuries, and significant operational losses, despite decades of improvements in traffic incident management, responder training, high-visibility equipment, and public awareness campaigns. In the past decade, this risk has been further compounded by the growing prevalence of distracted driving, the increasing complexity of roadways, inconsistent awareness of and compliance with *Slow Down, Move Over* laws, and evolving vehicle technologies. As a result, traditional safety measures alone cannot adequately address this new environment.

This report examines the magnitude, causes, and consequences of emergency responder struck-by events, describing the operational, financial and human impacts of incidents, and highlights factors that increase risk among responders. It also summarizes critical gaps in data collection, reporting, and prevention efforts and explores emerging technologies and policy strategies that can improve roadside safety. This report combines current research with practical recommendations to support the work of emergency response agencies, transportation professionals, policymakers, and safety leaders. It can help guide the development of evidence-

based solutions that better protect responders, preserve critical emergency resources, and improve safety for emergency responders on the roadside.

The Problem: Struck-by Events

Since 2019, more than 340 emergency responders in the United States have been struck and killed while operating on or near the roadway. This number comes from national fatality tracking data compiled by the Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firefighters Association's Emergency Responder Safety Institute (ERSI) through its **ReportStruckBy.com** database. Hundreds more have been injured, and countless additional incidents have resulted in responder vehicle damage, near-misses, or unreported exposures that never make it into official data systems, further obscuring the true scale of the risk. These incidents are not isolated events; they represent a persistent and systemic threat to responders operating in roadway environments.

For emergency response agencies, the consequences extend far beyond the immediate incident. Struck-by events result in catastrophic injuries and line-of-duty deaths, the loss or long-term damage of critical emergency vehicles, escalating workers' compensation and liability costs, and lasting psychological trauma for the personnel involved. These impacts degrade operational readiness, strain resources, and affect the long-term resilience of response organizations. There are also negative effects on the general public when expensive vehicles and equipment are damaged and unavailable to respond to emergencies in their communities. When emergency vehicles must be replaced, the purchasing process can take years for new equipment to be manufactured and delivered.

Some progress was achieved with the establishment of the National TIM Responder Training Program which was developed by responders for responders to establish a consistent national framework for roadway incident safety. This work helped improve consistency and advanced the National Unified Goal (NUG) for Traffic Incident Management: responder and roadway-user safety, safe and quick clearance, and effective communication, coordination, and cooperation. While these early efforts significantly improved baseline safety practices, participation and sustained engagement remain ongoing challenges. The reality is that the evolving risk environment continues to outpace traditional approaches.

Role of Distraction in Struck-by Events

Distracted driving has become one of the most persistent and dangerous threats facing emergency responders operating on today's roadways. Every incident, whether a medical emergency, vehicle fire, or collision, places responders in an environment where passing motorists may be inattentive, cognitively overloaded, or visually disconnected from the roadway ahead. When a motorist's attention is diverted by a smartphone, in-vehicle infotainment system, other competing demands, or when they engage in even minor tasks while traveling at high rates of speed, even the most visible warning devices and physical protections can become invisible, rendering them ineffective until it is too late.

Responders continue to experience line-of-duty deaths, near-misses, struck-by incidents, and preventable injuries caused by motorists whose attention is divided. This is despite the implementation of countermeasures such as **SHRP-2 Traffic Incident Management (TIM)** training, high-visibility apparel, blocking vehicles, emergency warning devices, and established traffic incident management practices.

The fundamental limitation of these traditional countermeasures, alongside legislative initiatives such as *Slow Down, Move Over* laws, is their reliance on drivers actively looking through their windshield and actually seeing what is in front of them on the road (i.e., maintaining situational awareness about what is happening around their vehicle) and reacting appropriately by slowing down, moving over, or stopping. Moreover, despite the passage of these laws in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, their requirements vary widely by jurisdiction. This inconsistent patchwork of laws can confuse drivers, particularly those traveling across state lines, resulting in uneven understanding, delayed decision-making, and reduced compliance.

More concerning, the scale of the distracted driving problem is significant. A recent **analysis of the socioeconomic costs of collisions** report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated distraction from a naturalistic observation study. It revealed that distraction was involved in 29% of all crashes, resulting in 10,546 fatalities, 1.3 million nonfatal injuries, and $98.2 billion in economic costs in 2019 (Blincoe et al., 2023). In addition, 639 nonoccupants, including pedestrians, bicyclists, and others, were killed in

distraction-related crashes, underscoring the broad public safety impact of this behavior.

At the same time, responders themselves must operate within increasingly complex and cognitively demanding environments. The integration of mobile data terminals, radios, navigation systems, and real-time information streams, combined with the urgency of emergency responses, introduces additional opportunities for distraction and momentary lapses. Combined, these factors can have serious consequences for responders, patients, and the public.

Available Data Falls Short

Existing crash and occupational injury databases are fundamentally misaligned with the realities of roadway response. As a result, responder struck-by incidents are critically under-identified and under-analyzed. Several structural gaps, described below, play a role in under-reporting.

- **Granularity gap & media erasure.** Official crash reports frequently rely on broad or general categories which often fail to consistently distinguish a civilian pedestrian from an on-duty responder. Compounding this problem, news outlets often pull directly from initial police reports, resulting in these tragedies being simply reported as pedestrians struck. This creates a dangerous cycle of erasure in which the occupational context is not documented, so the public narrative loses the critical connection to *Slow Down, Move Over* law violations. Hence, the true scope of the problem remains hidden.
- **Off-duty detail discrepancy.** Responders frequently work secondary employment for private contractors while in full uniform, armed, and utilizing official agency vehicles. A common example is deployment for a work zone traffic detail. If a struck-by incident occurs, their technical employment status by a private entity can mask the classification of the event as an official Line of Duty Death (LODD) or primary agency occupational injury. This coding ambiguity excludes operational responders from being clearly identified in official datasets, obscuring the magnitude of the problem.
- **Misclassification of strategic assets.** Databases often classify responder vehicle (i.e., fire trucks) strikes simply as standard vehicle crashes. This ignores the reality that emergency vehicles are heavily engineered, multi-million-dollar protective assets intentionally positioned as blockers to shield responders and the public. When these vehicles are struck, communities lose critical operational capacity, not just equipment.
- **Invisible secondary collisions.** Systems rarely capture secondary crashes in a systematic or standardized way. Examples of a secondary crash include drivers swerving to avoid the initial collision and striking an object, or failing to notice that traffic ahead has slowed because of a crash and then striking the slower-moving vehicle from behind. Without a relational data thread linking a secondary strike back to the primary collision incident, calculating the true magnitude of collision risk during operations and the duration of highway closures becomes nearly impossible.
- **Near-miss data void.** Databases do not systematically record near-miss events (i.e., collisions narrowly avoided by millimeters or milliseconds). Failing to capture or document



these high-frequency occurrences mask critical early warning data that professionals need to identify dangerous corridors before tragedy occurs.

- **Fragmentation, silos & inconsistent standards.** Data continues to be scattered in disjointed systems across agencies and disciplines including law enforcement, fire/EMS, towing and recovery, DOT operations, and local jurisdictions. Even when federal guidance exists, crash reporting practices remain inconsistent across state and municipal levels.

  A struck-by incident coded as a specific occupational hazard by one agency may be recorded as a generic vehicle crash in another just one county away. The absence of a standardized, consistent reporting structure impedes the accurate aggregation of national data, real-time analysis, and meaningful heat-mapping of responder risk. While the Model Minimum Uniform Crash Criteria (MMUCC) provides a format for the collection of secondary crash data, it has not been universally adopted by municipalities nationwide.

- **Over-reliance on voluntary data.** Since official data collection systems fail to consistently capture these distinct occupational hazards, emergency first responders are forced to rely on grassroots voluntary reporting platforms such as **ReportStruckBy.com**. These systems clearly demonstrate the problem exists, but they cannot capture its full scale. The reality is that voluntary data collection by its nature undercounts incidents, leaving critical gaps in our understanding of the risk to frontline professionals.

  More concerning, in the absence of standardized reporting, prevention efforts are built on incomplete intelligence. The bottom line is that if struck-by incidents involving emergency responders cannot be accurately measured, they cannot be consistently prevented.

Persons Injured in Struck-by Crashes

Several groups of professionals are injured or otherwise impacted by roadside struck by crashes. Private citizens who are drivers or passengers of disabled vehicles are similarly exposed. These groups are identified below.

- **Emergency responders** such as law enforcement, firefighters, and EMS personnel performing duties in active traffic environments while assisting at crash scenes, vehicle fires, medical emergencies, law enforcement activities, or traffic stops.
- **Department of Transportation (DOT) Safety Service Patrols** working on high-speed, limited access highways to assist disabled motorists and provide support at emergency scenes.
- **Drivers and passengers** of disabled vehicles exiting their cars after a breakdown or minor crash are highly vulnerable, especially on high speed or poorly lit roads.
- **Tow truck operators** spending extended periods outside their vehicles loading or recovering disabled cars, many times at crash scenes, and often on high speed roads.

It's noteworthy that many types of first responders are out on roadways reacting to unplanned incidents. But, even in cases where workers are present on a roadway with planning, preparation, and advance warning notifications (e.g., road construction, repair, electrical, telecom or water systems), they are still injured and killed in struck-by events.

- **Road construction and maintenance workers** building, repairing and re-designing roads in active traffic corridors, making struck by incidents a leading cause of occupational fatalities.
- **Utility and infrastructure workers** repairing electrical, telecom, or water systems and frequently stopping on shoulders or narrow lanes.

Risk Factors & High-Risk Conditions

First responders working on roadways encounter a variety of risks while performing their duties. Many of these risks are a function of the road environment and infrastructure while other risks pertain to cognitive load and the complexity of scenes where they work.



- They work or are present on busy roadways with personal safety equipment but lack the hard, protective exterior of a vehicle.
- Low visibility conditions, such as nighttime or inclement weather, during which many incidents occur.
- Roadside environments may lack concrete barriers, adequate lighting, or safe buffer zones separating them from traffic.
- They are primarily focused on work-related, job site tasks, making their situational awareness of traffic secondary.
- Passing drivers may be distracted, speeding, impaired, or simply fail to comply with *Slow Down, Move Over* laws.

Understanding the timing, the environment, and responder activity when a struck-by incident occurs is critical to prevention. High-risk conditions frequently combine traditional environmental hazards with modern systemic threats.

- **High-speed corridors and the fast lane culture.** The high speed typical of highways and interstates drastically reduces driver reaction times and increases impact severity. This risk is compounded by the growth of commercial vehicles on the road, often under pressure due to tight delivery schedules. Moreover, driver shortages contribute to drivers with higher levels of fatigue, cognitive overload and the complexity of the road environment with increasing congestion.
- **Moth effect and low visibility conditions.** Nighttime and low-visibility environments disproportionately increase risk due to drivers experiencing target fixation. In other words, drivers unconsciously steer toward the incident scene activity and emergency vehicles they are observing instead of moving away from them. This phenomenon turns incident scenes and emergency vehicles into distractions for passing motorists.
- **Adverse weather multipliers.** Rain, snow, fog, and ice significantly increase stopping distances and reduce visibility. Even when drivers attempt to comply with *Slow Down, Move Over* laws, reduced vehicle traction due to slippery roads and delayed perception can eliminate critical safety margins.
- **Zero-margin topography and the commercial parking crisis.** Limited shoulder space forces responders to work just feet from active traffic lanes. This is made worse by the national shortage of legal commercial vehicle parking, forcing freight drivers to occupy shoulders, ramps, and staging areas responders rely on for safe operations. The result is reduced buffer space and increased exposure during every incident.
- **Vulnerability of the chaos phase.** The earliest stages of scene stabilization immediately after a crash occurs represent the greatest danger. This is the chaos phase when the greatest risk often exists before the public even realizes an incident has occurred. Responders are exposed while assessing hazards, triaging patients, and establishing traffic control; often before advanced warning systems, blockers, or full lane closures are in place.
- **Distraction epidemic.** Post-pandemic driving behavior has shifted dramatically. Increased mobile phone use, aggressive driving, and

reduced driver empathy have created a more dangerous roadside environment for responders. Drivers are increasingly distracted, emotionally disconnected, and less responsive to established safety zones, warning devices, and *Slow Down, Move Over* expectations.

- **Complacency due to vehicle automation and ADAS limitations.** As vehicles become increasingly equipped with Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS) and partial automation, drivers are often lulled into a dangerous false sense of security. Over-reliance on technology and safety features causes many motorists to disengage from the driving task entirely. At the same time, many radar- and camera-based systems have demonstrated difficulty detecting stationary emergency vehicles or interpreting high-intensity warning lights. The result can be high-speed, secondary strikes without any braking into active incident scenes. Responder safety is often won or lost in the first minutes of roadside operations.

The bottom line is that the roadside is unforgiving and prevention begins long before impact.

Consequences of Struck-by Events

- **Costs.** The impact of a struck-by incident extends far beyond the immediate scene. In addition to the devastating personal toll of line-of-duty deaths and catastrophic injuries, these events create an immediate operational void. When a primary rescue engine or aerial is struck, the community loses a multimillion-dollar asset that often takes years to replace. This degrades an agency's operational readiness and places an undue burden on mutual aid resources from nearby communities or agencies. Furthermore, the economic consequences, including rising workers' compensation and liability costs, can threaten the long-term resilience of the affected organization. Some of the most common costs incurred are:
    - health costs related to injuries, fatalities, long term disability
    - unexpected costs for families, agencies, and communities
    - property loss
    - economic impacts on businesses and communities due to road closures, delays in goods and services
- **Organizational policy burden.** Following struck-by incidents, organizations also move to adopt distracted driving related policies if they have not yet done so or strengthen policies that are already in place. Both strategies typically require training, enforcement, and monitoring tasks. Some companies may further opt to implement telematic devices. This approach can help identify opportunities for intervention and motivate drivers to avoid distraction which is effective in reducing distracted driving-related events. Costs are often greater for reactive organizations which invite more complex systems, compared to proactive organizations which have implemented such programs on a limited budget.

  Perhaps the most substantial organizational cost of struck-by incidents is the potential for reputational damage to the company and potential loss of business or financial support due to negative publicity and loss of public trust.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." – Benjamin Franklin

Contributing Factors in Crashes

Recent research indicates that struck-by crashes involving emergency responders and roadside personnel are the result of a combination of unsafe driver behavior, hazardous roadway conditions, and limitations in visibility and protective controls.

- **Interstates and highways.** A recent study conducted by the American Automobile Association (AAA) found that 89% of roadside crashes occurred on roadways with speed limits of 55 miles per hour or greater. These high-speed environments significantly reduce driver reaction time and increase the severity of collisions when vehicles enter emergency scenes or work zones.
- **Low light / low visibility.** The research also identified nighttime and low-light conditions as a major contributing factor. Approximately 63% of roadside crashes occurred during darkness, and nearly two-thirds of those crashes happened in areas without roadway lighting.

Reduced visibility, glare from emergency lighting, weather conditions, and diminished driver awareness during overnight hours all contribute to elevated risk for responders operating outside their vehicles. Responders working in dark or poorly illuminated environments are often exposed to fast-moving traffic with little physical protection, increasing the likelihood of serious injury or fatality.

- **Driver behaviors.** This remains the most significant and consistent factor in struck-by incidents. Distracted driving, alcohol and drug impairment, excessive speed, and driver fatigue continue to be disproportionately represented in fatal responder-involved crashes. These behaviors impair judgment, reduce situational awareness, and increase the likelihood of lane departures or delayed evasive actions near emergency scenes. The widespread use of mobile devices has further intensified the distraction problem, particularly on high-speed roadways where reaction time is critical. Even a momentary lapse in attention can have catastrophic consequences.
- **Low awareness and compliance with** *Slow Down, Move Over* **laws.** Although all states have enacted some variation of these laws requiring motorists to slow down and/or change lanes when approaching emergency vehicles that are stopped, compliance remains inconsistent and difficult to enforce. Many drivers are either unaware of these laws, fail to recognize emergency scenes in time to react safely, or underestimate the dangers faced by roadside responders. Studies suggest that limited public awareness, inconsistent penalties, and varying state requirements contribute to ongoing noncompliance.
- **Infrastructure, roadway and weather conditions.** Additional contributing factors include increasing complexity of modern roadway systems, inadequate temporary traffic control measures, limited shoulder space, congested traffic conditions, and inclement weather. Together, these conditions create a high-risk operating environment for emergency responders, tow operators, law enforcement personnel, highway workers, and other roadside professionals.

Current research increasingly emphasizes the importance of enhanced driver education, stronger enforcement of *Slow Down, Move Over* laws, improved scene visibility, advanced digital warning technology, and standardized traffic incident management practices as critical strategies for reducing struck-by fatalities and injuries.

Emerging Solutions

Improved data collection. Along with improving driver attention on the road, a clear understanding of the scope of this issue is essential and depends on improved data collection. This can be achieved through standardized reporting across crash reports, trauma centers, and responder records. Including consistent indicators of whether an emergency responder and/or their vehicle was struck would significantly strengthen the quality and completeness of available data.

- **Data collection improvements.** Overcoming critical gaps in existing crash data that limit understanding of the true magnitude and characteristics of this problem requires complementary strategies. First, optimizing voluntary reporting platforms such as **ReportStruckBy.com** can not only demonstrate the feasibility of self-reporting tools, but also increase understanding of the problem. Second, a clear strategy around database development and reporting (e.g., the Struck-By Sentinel (SBS) database in development by The Emergency Responder Safety Institute), can help make important distinctions between on-duty responders and general pedestrians as well as capture the specific occupation context of each strike. Further, this approach will facilitate a closer examination of the prevalence of secondary crashes in relation to this problem. This is a crucial step toward more effective, evidence-based prevention and funding strategies.
- **Voluntary reporting of incidents.** Voluntary reporting platforms such as ReportStruckBy.com demonstrate the feasibility of self-reporting but likely underrepresent total events due to voluntary nature of participation.

Technologies. There are several technological solutions that will help bring motorists' attention back to the road and increase awareness around roadside incidents. These promising solutions

include connected vehicle digital alerts, advanced visibility systems, and real time situational awareness platforms that warn drivers earlier and give responders better protection. These technologies add layers of safety beyond traditional cones, flares, and high visibility gear. Below is more information about each of these solutions.

- **Connected Vehicle "Responder to Vehicle" (R2V) Digital Alerts (HAAS Alert® and similar).** R2V alerts are one of the biggest breakthroughs in roadside responder safety. They push warnings directly into drivers' navigation apps, in vehicle systems, or smartphones before motorists see lights or personnel on the roadway. R2V systems activate automatically when emergency lights or traffic control devices are turned on. The alerts can reach drivers miles ahead, giving them more time to slow down or move over. They integrate with GPS, OEM vehicle systems, and traveler information networks. For example, the warning will alert the driver through their Google Maps or WAZE navigation apps. Alerts can even trigger wireless emergency alerts within a geofenced area. This technology is highlighted by the Federal Highway Administration as a key component of next generation Traffic Incident Management.
- **Enhanced Visibility & Advance Warning Systems (H.E.L.P.® and similar).** These systems deploy high intensity lighting patterns, digital alerts, and connected vehicle warnings designed specifically to prevent struck by crashes. They make stopped or slow moving emergency vehicles unmistakably visible by providing advance warning communication to approaching motorists. These systems are currently being adopted by emergency responder agencies to reduce work zone and roadside collision risk. Independent research cited by Emergency Safety Solutions shows that these lighting and alert systems significantly improve driver awareness and reaction time.
- **Smart Work Zone Systems.** Virginia Tech Transportation Institute is researching a **Smart Work Zone** system that includes **Smart Vests**, **Smart Cones**, and **Base Station Devices**. The system interfaces with a Work Zone Builder tablet application to provide a complete system for managing work zone safety while providing data for informing Connected and Automated Vehicles about work zone deployments. This system could be adjusted to also assist with roadside incident response and protecting emergency responders.
- **Emergency Vehicle Preemption (EVP).** Although focused on response rather than roadside scenes, Emergency Vehicle Preemption (EVP) systems give emergency



vehicles green lights through intersections, reducing crash risk enroute and improving arrival times.

Ongoing research is underway to make work on roads and highways safer for responders and drivers. The difficulty is making the research into viable commercial products that are more accessible responders and integrating data into a more digestible and readily available format.

The Path Forward

Educating drivers about the risks and realities of struck-by incidents is a critical component of improving responder safety. Emphasizing how individual driver behavior directly affects the safety of emergency responders is essential to foster a stronger sense of shared responsibility and encourage safer driving habits around active roadside incidents.

The responder community is uniquely positioned to lead these efforts by sharing firsthand experiences and clearly communicating the consequences of inattentive driving near roadside scenes. Personal accounts, demonstrations, and real-world examples can make the risks more tangible for the public and reinforce the importance of slowing down, moving over, and staying alert.

Targeted outreach efforts such as public service announcements, social media engagement, and partnerships with community organizations can help amplify messaging to reach a wider audience. Integrating this messaging into existing community prevention education and outreach initiatives conducted by fire departments can further expand their reach and reinforce their impact.

In the same vein, strengthening the consistency of *Slow Down, Move Over* laws across states can reduce confusion and increase compliance. Complementing this effort with the sharing of enforcement best practices can help law enforcement agencies apply these laws more effectively.

Looking forward, there is also a need for dedicated funding to modernize crash reporting systems, ensuring incidents involving on-duty responders are clearly and consistently identified, and secondary crashes at roadside incident scenes are reported with specific details to help provide more useful analysis.

In addition, successfully scaling emerging technological solutions described above will require strong support from the public. Developing education and awareness strategies that educate decision-makers and clearly communicate the safety benefits can encourage broader adoption of safety strategies among drivers. At the same time, agencies will need sufficient funding to invest in and deploy these tools effectively.

Finally, ongoing evaluation of emergency responder training programs such as Traffic Incident Management (TIM) is necessary to assess and strengthen their effectiveness over time. Training should focus on reducing exposure to struck-by incidents and the safety of all roadway users.

Aligning modern risks with modern solutions is essential to guide agencies in developing more effective strategies to protect responders, reduce preventable incidents, and improve safety outcomes for everyone who shares the roadway.

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The **National Distracted Driving Coalition (NDDC)** was formed in March 2021 to address distracted driving, which is a contributing factor to road deaths and injuries. This road safety issue is a priority concern shared by many organizations across many sectors. A diverse cross-section of entities, representing academia, non-profits, government, advocacy, and industries, including insurance, transportation, automotive and technology, have come together to create a National Action Plan to tackle this important issue.

Disclaimer

The National Distracted Driving Coalition (NDDC), formed by the National Transportation Safety Board, is composed of diverse members and stakeholders representing a variety of organizations, including non-profits, industries, governments and communities. The diversity of views and opinions is a key feature of the NDDC designed to encourage the development of innovative approaches to preventing distracted driving. This strategy enables the NDDC to explore multiple tactics to reduce distracted driving crashes. In light of this diversity, it is unlikely consensus can be achieved across all organizations with respect to materials produced. NDDC participation does not suggest all organizations necessarily agree with, or support, NDDC proposals, recommendations, or educational materials, and it would be improper to impute any one organization's agreement with, or support for, NDDC proposals, recommendations or materials solely on the basis of NDDC participation. Similarly, organizations may advance views or positions that do not necessarily represent the NDDC. Those beliefs, opinions, or statements should be considered to be solely those of the individual organization and not of the NDDC.

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