Testimony of
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Federal Communications Commission

Before the
Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
United States Senate

Hearing on
Combating Distracted Driving: Managing Behavioral and Technological Risks

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I would like to thank Senator Rockefeller, Ranking Member Hutchison, and other distinguished Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify on the important topic of distracted driving. I want to commend Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood for his excellent statement and his leadership on this issue.

This hearing has been called to explore a pressing concern: the increasing level of distracted driving relating to the use of communications devices, and the safety risks posed by that use. In this statement, I will briefly discuss some of the context for this problem, and then describe some actions that the Federal Communications Commission is pursuing to be a constructive part of the solution.

First, context. Communications technologies, particularly mobile wireless devices and networks, are a major contributor to job creation and the economy. According to CTIA, wireless capital expenditures from 1998-2008 totaled more than $217 billion. In addition to promoting economic growth, these technologies connect us every day to family, friends and colleagues and are powerful tools for addressing many of the major challenges facing the nation. Mobile communications can be a life-saver, improving emergency response by, for example, providing stranded motorists with immediate means to reach help, and by giving ambulance services, public safety answering points, and other first responders instant access to 21st century communications networks. Mobile communications can also help promote better health care – for example, by enabling remote diagnosis and monitoring, providing better care at lower cost for patients with diabetes, heart disease, and other illnesses. And mobile communications can play a role in improving education and fostering a clean energy future. Further, mobile broadband will contribute significantly to our nation's overall broadband strategy, which, as Congress has directed, must seek to provide all Americans with high-speed Internet access.

Growth in wireless devices has been astronomic. In 1995, only 34 million people subscribed to mobile phone service. By the summer of 2009, there were 276 million subscribers. Today, the vast majority of teenagers – four out of five – now have mobile phones, as parents well know.

The popularity of mobile devices, however, has had some unintended and even dangerous consequences. We now know that mobile communications is leading to a significant increase in distracted driving, resulting in injury and loss of life. According to AAA, nearly 50% of teens admit to texting while driving. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported in 2008 that driver distraction is the cause of 16% of all fatal crashes and 21% of crashes resulting

in an injury. Distracted driving endangers life and property and the current levels of injury and loss are unacceptable. There's no way around it – this is an urgent problem that simply must be addressed.

I do not believe there is a single solution to this challenge. The responsibility lies with all of us – individuals, companies in the wireless space, as well as government. Everyone involved can and should take appropriate action, with the goal of dramatically reducing and ultimately eliminating the risk of distracted driving due to the use of communications devices.

Individuals should take personal responsibility. Adults should drive responsibly, and families and friends should encourage each other and help each other drive responsibly. Drivers of all ages – not just teenagers – should refrain from texting while driving. We should develop a cultural norm that driving while texting is totally unacceptable.

The wireless industry has made some strong first efforts to raise public awareness. The industry trade association, CTIA, in coordination with the National Safety Council, announced a joint "On the Road, Off the Phone" campaign that is focused on educating teen drivers on the dangers of distracted driving. Together they have devised a website for parents and teens that includes suggested ground rules for teen drivers, and have rolled out a public service announcement warning of the dangers of texting while driving.

Government at all levels has a role to play as well. On the Federal level, I applaud Secretary LaHood and the Department of Transportation for leading an impressive, coordinated effort to increase public awareness of the dangers of distracted driving. In addition, the National Traffic Safety Administration has encouraged the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration – the agency tasked with reducing crashes of large trucks and buses – to prohibit mobile use by commercial drivers of school buses and motor coaches, except in emergencies. Also at the Federal level, as you are aware, the President recently issued an Executive Order that prohibits Federal workers from texting while driving on the job or when using government vehicles.

We also recognize the central role of the States in this area. According to the Governor's Highway Safety Association, 18 States as well as the District of Columbia have made it illegal to text while driving. Moreover, the National Traffic Safety Board has identified prohibiting the use of interactive mobile devices by young novice drivers as one of its top "wish list" items for rulemaking at the state level.

The FCC also has a role to play – by helping to educate the public and supporting innovative problem-solving. Education is vital to any comprehensive plan addressing distracted driving. Educational initiatives can alert the public to the dangers of getting distracted with mobile communications services while behind the wheel. We at the Commission should explore ways in which these educational messages can reach drivers through multiple avenues – including through schools, public service announcements, and educational initiatives sponsored by the wireless industry itself.

In this regard, we at the Commission can bring to bear our recent outreach experience with the digital television transition and on broadband. On an inter-agency basis, we will consult with the Department of Transportation as we institute a consumer education campaign.

And outside of the federal government, we will explore collaborations to support the safe use of mobile devices with our existing networks of licensees; public safety entities; trade associations; tribal, state and local counterparts; and consumer groups.

The FCC's Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau has issued a Consumer Advisory, launched a website, and is now preparing a broader educational campaign. We hope to serve as a resource to a variety of organizations such as schools, public safety entities, consumer groups, and others. I also directed the agency's Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau to provide information on the FCC website on the topic of distracted driving, with links to other organizations working on this issue.

New ideas, advances in technology, and entrepreneurial thinking can also induce changes in consumer behavior. A ready market for technology solutions to address the dangers posed by distracted drivers should exist, and innovative products could be part of the solution. Parents want tools to help keep new, teenaged drivers in their households focused solely on driving while they are behind the wheel. Insurance companies may want to encourage safer driving by giving discounts for people using such technologies. Employers may also want such devices to prevent employees from texting while driving. Because the FCC licenses and regulates mobile services and approves devices for use in the consumer marketplace, the FCC can potentially play a useful role in enabling technology and encouraging the development of marketplace solutions.

Some current technologies could potentially be adapted to address this issue now. Some smartphones have interfaces for people with visual impairments. Other technologies allow users to control, with their voices, their mobile phones and vehicle systems. Many believe that these technologies might someday be used by drivers to avoid the dangerous distraction of looking at device screens. There may also be opportunities to use RFID-sensor technology in keychains that would disable selected functions on a driver's device activated by the start up of their car. In addition, there is what some call "haptic" technology, which simulates a sense of touch, creating the impression of buttons or controls even on flat surfaces. Are there prospects for haptic technology to give drivers more control over their cars and electronic devices while keeping their eyes on the road? Or might existing voice-to-text technologies be used to improve safety?

The FCC would like to play a part in encouraging innovative technologies that can reduce injuries and loss of life due to distracted driving. We are examining whether there are ways in which we can act to create a climate that will allow consumers and industry to have more options in addressing this serious problem.

Finally, I have been urging FCC employees to set an example regarding this issue. I reinforced to agency employees the importance of complying with the President's Executive Order banning the use of federal devices to text while driving as well as banning the use of personal devices while driving government vehicles. I further urged FCC employees to avoid texting and driving at all times and to encourage their families and friends to do likewise.

In closing, I look forward to continuing to work with the Committee, Secretary LaHood, industry and innovators on this important issue. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.