

Opening Statement
Rep. Jan Schakowsky
House Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
Hearing on “VIN Database and Auto Whistleblower Bills”
September 25, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding today’s hearing on two bills related to auto recalls.

I would like to recognize Will Wallace, who is testifying today on behalf of Consumers Union. Will is an outstanding former staffer of this Subcommittee who brings important insight to this hearing.

I think this Committee should be focused on BIG issues, like Volkswagen’s fraudulent emissions testing cheating that was revealed earlier this month. And we should be addressing vehicle safety issues comprehensively, as my Vehicle Safety Improvement Act would do.

With more than 95 million American vehicles subject to safety recalls over the past two years, we must improve the oversight of the auto industry and the efficacy and timeliness of recalls.

Unfortunately, these bills miss the mark.

While I support efforts to enhance the communication between auto companies and drivers whose cars are subject to a recall, I don’t believe the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) database discussion draft would achieve that goal.

Auto manufacturers are already able to access the names and addresses of drivers whose vehicles are subject to a recall. The difference in the discussion draft is that those records would be free of charge to the auto companies.

The bill would also impose significant costs on NHTSA and the states with no funding provided to implement the new database.

The Illinois Secretary of State's office has serious concerns about that lack of support.

The second bill is intended to encourage auto industry whistleblowers. While I appreciate the inclusion of language allowing whistleblowers to receive compensation and anonymity for coming forward, I have concerns about bill's stipulations. For example, it explicitly prohibits whistleblowers from receiving compensation or protection unless they have reported their concerns internally. I worry that provision would discourage whistleblowers from acting and put them at professional risk for doing so.

There is a broader and more impactful legislative alternative to improve auto safety. My Vehicle Safety Improvement Act – which is cosponsored by Ranking Member Pallone and 9 other members of this Committee – is that alternative. It increases the amount and accessibility of information auto manufacturers must share with NHTSA and the public about vehicle safety issues and provides new authority to expedite auto recalls if they pose an “imminent hazard” of serious injury or death.

I think the bills we will consider today unsuccessfully nibble at the margins when we should be taking stronger action. I am not just disappointed – I'm frustrated.

I again urge this Subcommittee to take up the Vehicle Safety Improvement Act, and I yield back.