Opening Statement of Rep. Jan Schakowsky
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
Hearing on "Disrupter Series: Self-Driving Cars"
November 15, 2016

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

I first want to take a moment to recognize a great loss in the auto safety community. On Thursday, Clarence Ditlow of the Center for Auto Safety passed away after his battle with cancer.

For 40 years, Clarence led the Center for Auto Safety where he was a tireless advocate for stronger auto safety standards. He fought for lemon laws to ease return of defective vehicles in all 50 states. And if you've ever had a recall on your vehicle, there's a decent chance Clarence was somehow involved in pushing the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and automakers to take action. He provided tremendous insight to lawmakers over the years, including as a witness before this very subcommittee.

Clarence continued fighting for consumers until his final days. As recently as September, he was working with my office on reducing the number of used cars sold with open recalls.

He even weighed in on today's topic. In August, he wrote an op-ed on the importance of strong safety standards for self-driving cars.

Clarence has an outstanding legacy, but I know he saw much work still to be done. I can think of no better tribute than to continue his fight to improve auto safety. I hope we can do so on this subcommittee.

Protecting consumers must be the key focus as we consider today's topic – self-driving cars. A car without a human driver could be an exciting development or a frightening proposition. Which one it is depends on whether we take the correct approach to the development of this technology.

One of the key arguments in favor of self-driving cars is safety. According to NHTSA, 94 percent of car crashes are caused in part by driver error. Automation has the potential to help.

Ensuring that autonomous vehicles improve safety requires thorough testing and oversight. We must evaluate not only how the vehicle's features work but also the effect of those features on human behavior. I appreciate NHTSA's efforts to be proactive in its approach to autonomous vehicles, and I look forward to learning more about how its policy framework will work in practice.

As we think about the long-term potential of self-driving cars, we also need to consider the intermediate challenges. We are not going to shift to 100% self-driving vehicles overnight. Even if this technology is adopted relatively quickly, we will see a transition period where traditional, semi-autonomous, and fully autonomous vehicles share the road. All those vehicles – and their passengers – must be able to safely interact.

We should also recognize the impact self-driving cars could have on those who drive for a living – taxi drivers, chauffeurs, delivery men, and truckers.

Automakers are still working through safety issues with autonomous vehicles. For example, two self-driving Teslas crashed this year.

Cybersecurity is another critical area for autonomous vehicles to be successful. Hacking a self-driving car could put lives in danger. Developers must take the utmost precautions to prevent the car's systems from being compromised and providing fail-safe mechanisms if security measures are ever ineffective.

Accidents involving self-driving vehicles raise new questions. How safe must self-driving cars be before we're comfortable having them on the road? When something goes wrong, when is it the fault of the manufacturer and when is it the fault of the user?

NHTSA is adapting its traditional approach to auto safety as it considers the design, use, and safety features of self-driving vehicles. I welcome this initiative, but I want to ensure that safety remains paramount.

I also want to hear a firm industry commitment to safety and cybersecurity.

As I said, innovation in self-driving cars has tremendous potential. If done right, this technology could save lives, increase energy efficiency, and provide convenience for consumers. We must make sure that the right policies are in place to achieve the maximum benefit from this technology.