

Opening Statement
Chairman Frank Pallone, Jr.
Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce
Hearing on “Legislation to Make Cars in America Safer”
July 24, 2019

Since 2014, the number of automobile fatalities has steeply increased after nearly a decade of falling. Despite the rising death toll, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has failed to prioritize vehicle safety. NHTSA has failed to complete needed rulemakings or prioritize resources to address preventable injuries and fatalities.

Where the Administration has been slow to act, Congress must step in. The bills we are considering today will help address preventable tragedies, including child vehicular heatstroke, carbon monoxide poisoning, and impaired driving.

As we learned in May when this Subcommittee held a hearing on summer driving dangers, 823 children have died from heatstroke after being left in hot cars over the last 20 years. Since that hearing, 12 more children have died. That is 21 children so far this year.

No child should lose their life because they become trapped in a hot car. Fortunately, technologies exist today that can end these senseless tragedies—technologies that can alert drivers to the presence of a child in the vehicle or remind a driver to check their backseat before leaving the car. Regrettably, these sorts of life saving technologies have not been widely deployed.

I commend Chair Schakowsky and Representatives Ryan and King for their work on the Hot Cars Act. This legislation would require vehicles to be equipped with safety technologies to detect and alert the driver to the presence of a child or occupant in a rear seat of a vehicle after the engine is shut off. And I look forward to exploring how these technological revolutions can save lives.

I also look forward to exploring how we can ensure that technological innovations—like keyless ignition systems—do not actually present unintended safety issues. Keyless ignition systems provide an added level of convenience for the driver—merely sit in the vehicle and push to start, all with your keys in your pocket or bag. But that added convenience has been tied to a troubling rise in carbon monoxide deaths—more than three dozen since 2006.

Without the physical motion of turning a key, some drivers inadvertently forget to turn off the vehicle. And some keyless ignition systems permit the engine to continue idling even when the driver exits the vehicle with the keys. If the vehicle is left in an enclosed area, tragedy can ensue as dangerous levels of carbon monoxide build.

Such a tragedy claimed the lives of Dr. James Livingston and Dr. Sherry Penney. I thank Ms. Livingston for testifying today and sharing her parents’ story. And I again commend Chair Schakowsky, as well as Representatives Soto, Kennedy, Moulton, Deutch, and Gonzalez for

introducing the PARK IT Act. This legislation would ensure the engine of a keyless ignition vehicle automatically shuts off if left idling for an unreasonable amount of time.

I also look forward to discussing two impaired driving bills being considered here today. With 10,000 deaths—30 percent of all fatal crashes— tied to drunk driving and troubling increases in the rate of drug-impaired driving, we must double down on our efforts to prevent such threats to automobile safety.

I thank our witnesses for testifying this morning, and I look forward to the discussion.