



Traffic Safety Center SETTING NEW DIRECTIONS IN TRAFFIC SAFETY Newsletter

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[Printable PDF of this page](#)

Traffic Safety Culture Newsletter

Table of Contents—

[1. Traffic Safety Culture: What is it?](#)

[2. Traffic Safety Culture: What can we do to change it?](#)

[3. Traffic Safety Culture: The role of speed](#)

[4. Traffic Safety Culture: Interviews with two California policymakers](#)

[Chris Murphy, California Office of Traffic Safety](#)

[Jesse Bhullar, Caltrans Safety Engineer](#)

Search ALL Issues of the TSC Newsletter

Go

4. Traffic Safety Culture: Interviews with two California policymakers, Chris Murphy, California Office of Traffic Safety

Chris Murphy directs the California Office of Traffic Safety, a state department that awards traffic safety grants to cities, counties and state departments. He is also the immediate past chair of the Governors Highway Safety Association, an advocacy group of state safety programs. He is one of four co-leaders (along with Jesse Bhullar, of the California Department of Transportation) of California's Strategic Highway Safety Plan. Murphy has been worked at OTS for about 23 years.

In terms of traffic safety, California is one of the better performers; in fact, by most measures it ranks at or near the top in most traffic safety categories. That would argue for the existence of a more developed traffic safety culture here. Is there such a thing as a traffic safety culture? And if so, what has been your experience with it?

There are such stark differences between the West Coast and the rest of the U.S. Washington, Oregon, and California are the gold standard as far as seat belt rates and motorcycle helmet use and in terms of acceptance of traffic safety laws. Only 26 states have a primary seat belt law and 20 states have a motorcycle helmet law. States without these life saving laws struggle each year for their passage.

People here seem to be much more receptive to laws that have been proven to save lives. That makes our job so much easier.

What is the reason for that resistance in other states? Is there something about the California safety culture that could be adapted or used in these states?

Some states struggle with the balance between personal choice and laws that are designed to save lives. I believe in years to come, these states will eventually pass primary seat belt and mandatory motorcycle helmet laws.

But there've been examples of changing cultures. Like smoking.

We did make gains with smoking, especially when states such as California banned smoking in public buildings. Smokers are now a distinct minority. As a result, laws limiting exposure to second hand smoke are becoming even more wide spread.

With primary seat belt laws and motorcycle helmet laws, it's slow going.

Many of my counterparts spend so much energy educating legislators and they get close and hit a snag, but they come back and start all over again the next session, because they know these laws work.

California passed a primary seat belt laws in 1993; motorcycle helmet laws in 1992.

In 11 states, you can't even do sobriety checkpoints, even though the Supreme Court in 1990 ruled them constitutional. Texas is one of the states, and each year traffic safety advocates and MADD work diligently but unsuccessfully to establish checkpoints.

What about speed? A lot of people in the AAA Foundation report say it needs more attention.

Everyone agrees speeding needs more attention. In California, 39% of all traffic fatalities are speeding related. A comprehensive speeding reduction program must fully integrate public acceptance, rational speed limits, and increased publicized enforcement.

What do you think of automated speed enforcement (ASE), to reduce enforcement costs and make it more visible?

IF used correctly, ASE holds promise. Last year, the IACP (International Association of Chiefs of Police) published a model ASE policy that lays out key components for a successful ASE program.

How do you think the zero-death movement fits in?

I feel very strongly about that. I absolutely support the "toward zero deaths, every 1 counts" approach.

The Office of Traffic Safety and the Governors Highway Safety Association together with several states have adopted the "toward zero deaths" goal. We now for the first time have a goal that will not have to be moved or adjusted. For example, years ago there was 70 percent seatbelt use by 1982, then it came and

went, and we pushed back the goal. Then we had the 1.0 mileage death rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled by 2008. That never happened, so they moved it out to 2011. Every time we move the number or the target year, the traffic safety community faces criticism from many who cite the reason we did not meet a specific goal was because we were not doing our jobs. In California, OTS has been a leader in establishing a performance based program, but to have a national overarching goal numeric goal, that can only be arbitrarily selected, is not in the best interest of traffic safety, does not reflect even moderately how well a state is performing, and in the end may be counter productive as well.

What about the idea of avoidable accidents?

Crashes are predictable and preventable. We in the traffic safety community need to purge the word "accident" in our vocabulary when talking traffic safety. Instead we all need to remember to use "crash" or "collision". Driver inattention and speeding contribute heavily to avoidable crashes and must continue to be addressed with all age groups.

Can technology help?

Yes, some. Mercedes has a system now that detects drowsy driving without a camera. You drive a little differently. The way you hold the wheel is different. The car notices and alerts you.

What about rural roads? Does their higher crash rate mean there is a different driving culture on them?

Design plays such a major role in rural roads. A mistake on a two-lane country road with a 55 mph speed limit is a recipe for disaster. But with limited resources, it's hard to put in shoulders, and make other improvements on all rural roads. Local drivers don't realize the risk; they are most often the victims.