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Esther Peterson to Senator James O. Eastland, 11 October 1977

Esther Peterson

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

October 11, 1977

Dear Senator Eastland:

I would like to take this opportunity to add my voice to those of Chairman Magnuson and a majority of the members of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation who recently voted to approve Secretary Adams' decision to require automatic automobile restraint systems in all automobiles. Department of Transportation figures show that full implementation of this requirement would save 9,000 lives and prevent tens of thousands of injuries annually.

I believe this is a decision which consumers will willingly accept. As you may know, a recent Gallup Poll found that 46 percent of the American public favored the airbag -- one type of automatic restraint -- while 37 percent replied negatively. Those between 18-29 years old favored the system 65 to 27 percent.

Consumers have registered support for these systems for several reasons. Current seat belt systems are uncomfortable and intrusive. Fewer than 25 percent of motorists are even willing to buckle up despite the life-saving potential of seat belts. While the public has failed to respond to "buckle up" reminders such as buzzers, warning lights, and the now infamous interlock, they oppose even more vigorously mandatory belt use laws advocated by some opponents of automatic restraint systems. In the recent Gallup Poll, 76 percent were found to oppose such laws. Contrast the awkwardness of conventional belt systems with the ease and comfort of an airbag, neatly tucked out of the way, but ready to be activated in a crash situation with no action required by the vehicle occupant.

Consumers also recognize that there are costs which must be borne by all of us when an automobile accident takes a life or inflicts an injury. These societal costs, such as increased insurance rates, additional public expenditures for hospitals, police and emergency medical care, additional public assistance for families left without a breadwinner, and a host of others, would all be reduced, offsetting most if not all of the cost of the improved restraint systems.

Airbags have been thoroughly tested -- airbag equipped vehicles have accumulated over 500 million miles of actual highway driving. And testing will continue during the long four-to-six-year lead time period which Secretary Adams' decision calls for.
While consumers seem to succumb to an "it will never happen to me" syndrome, "it" does happen to 46,000 of us each year. In point of fact, our annual highway losses are a public health problem of enormous proportion, but it is one which fortunately affords itself to a technical solution. I urge you to vote against S. Con. Res. 31 which would overturn the automatic restraint regulation.

Sincerely,

Esther Peterson
Special Assistant to the President
for Consumer Affairs

The Honorable James O. Eastland
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510