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## Testimony of Director Lauren V. Stewart

### IN OPPOSITION TO LD 1479

#### An Act To Make Certain Traffic Infractions Secondary Offenses

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. My name is Lauren Stewart, and I am the Director of the Maine Bureau of Highway Safety. I am here today to testify on behalf of the Department of Public Safety and the Bureau of Highway Safety in Opposition to LD 1479. While you also have testimony in opposition on behalf of the department and the Maine State Police, this testimony is specific to the proposal to make seat belts a secondary traffic offense.

Maine upgraded its seat belt law from secondary to primary effective September 20, 2007, with an educational grace period to April 1, 2008. Maine is one of 35 states currently with primary belt laws for at least front seat passengers. Only six states still retain a secondary belt law for all passengers. In general, stronger seat belt laws lead to more seat belt use, fewer fatalities, and the risk of a citation encourages some drivers and passengers to buckle up.

Car crashes remain the leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15 and 35. Unbelted drivers and passengers are two times as likely to suffer a traumatic brain injury as seat-belt wears and they are nearly twice as likely to require hospitalization as seat-belt users. As a result, medical treatment for non-seat belt wearers costs more.

In 2007, only 79.8% of Mainers were observed using a seat belt despite it being one of the easiest and safest choices drivers and passengers could make. In 2021 while 90.4% of Americans understood the lifesaving value of wearing a seat belt, 91.8% of Maine occupants were observed using this lifesaving device, surpassing the national average.

Increasing seat belt use is one of the most effective and least expensive ways to save lives on the state's roadways. Research has confirmed that lap/shoulder seat belts, when used correctly, reduce the risk of fatal injury to front-seat passenger car occupants by 45 percent and moderate-to-critical injury to front-seat passenger car occupants by 50 percent.

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Buckle Up. Drive Safely.

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Additionally, primary seat belt laws are particularly important for protecting high-risk young drivers. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) studies make it clear that young people do not respond to isolated educational messages about seat belt use, but they do respond when faced with the potential of a ticket and fine. Research has shown that fatality rates among young vehicle occupants are lower in states with primary seat belt laws than in other states.

Among passenger vehicle occupant fatalities where restraint use was known in 2018, the 25-to-34 age group had the highest percentage of unrestrained occupants (60%), followed by the 21-to-24 age group at 58% unrestrained. Children learn what they live - child restraint use drops by 40% when parents are not buckled up.

Finally, seat belts are the best defense we have against impaired, aggressive, and distracted drivers. Being buckled up during a crash helps keep you safe and secure inside your vehicle. Being completely or even partially ejected from a vehicle is almost always deadly. Seat belts and airbags are designed to work together and air bags alone are not enough to protect you; in fact, if you don't wear your seat belt, you could be thrown into a rapidly opening frontal air bag with such force it could injure or even kill you.

Please ask yourselves, if during this time when we are seeing alarming and record-setting increases in deaths nationally, due to traffic crashes resulting from an increase in reckless driving, increased speeds, and lack of belt use, if now is the time to undo 15 years of a life-saving law in Maine.

For these reasons, we urge you to vote "Ought Not to Pass" on LD 1479.

On behalf of the Department of Public Safety and the Bureau of Highway Safety, I thank you for your time and would be happy to try and answer any questions that you might have.

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