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Commerce Committee

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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. My name is Kyran Quinlan. I am a pediatrician on faculty at the University of Chicago. I am a clinician, a child passenger safety researcher and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss this important issue.

We are talking today about how to better protect our children from the greatest threat to their health. In the United States, nothing kills more children than motor vehicle crashes. Each year, about 500 of our children aged 4-8 years die and another 90,000 are injured while riding in a motor vehicle. With most occupant safety attention focused on younger child passengers, this older group of what has been termed "forgotten children" has not experienced any real decrease in their occupant fatality rates over the last 20 years.

These children are real. I could tell you about the 5-year-old boy who was brought to the University of Chicago recently after being in a crash. He was small for a 5-year-old. Despite being buckled up in a lap/shoulder belt, he was ejected from his family's car. Unconscious and bloody, he lay motionless in the street with a broken skull, pelvis, thigh and shin bones. He lived, and his bones will mend, but he

will have a long road back with rehabilitation for his severe head injury. Or I could tell you about the 8-year-old boy who was recently cared for at our hospital after being in a crash. He put the shoulder belt behind his back to keep it from rubbing and cutting across his neck. In the instant he was thrown violently forward in the crash, the only thing that stopped him was the poorly-fitting lap belt. After crushing his soft internal organs, the lap belt then found and fractured his back bone leaving him paralyzed. Multiple abdominal surgeries were successful at repairing the injuries to his intestines and other internal organs. Much less successful however, have been the attempts to bring him out of the growing depression from realizing that while only 8, he will never walk again.

These children are too big for a car seat, but are not big enough to fit safely in the seat belts of the car. They need booster seats to raise them up so that the lap belt fits low and snug across their upper thighs and the shoulder belt crosses their collarbone and not their neck. Not using a booster seat puts these children at unnecessary risk. As you have just heard from Dr. Winston, there is good evidence that boosters protect children, but few families are using them. In Illinois specifically, Dr. Winston's system tells us that at most about 20% of the 4-5-year-olds use boosters, just a handful of 6-year-olds do, and virtually no 7- or 8-year- olds do.

This fits with what I see on the south side of Chicago. I recently saw a family with a 4-year-old who

had outgrown her car seat and was using just a seat belt. I discussed the importance and need for a booster and advised them to get one for her. At the next visit, they told me they had not gotten a booster. I frankly told them I was interested to know if there was something I could have said that would have been more persuasive the first time. The mom said, "no, I remember what you said. You told me that without a booster, my daughter's back could break and she could become paralyzed in a crash, but I just hadn't gotten around to it." I could use help to convince parents to use boosters. Being able to say that riding without a booster is against the law would certainly help.

So there's a real problem here. We're dealing with the leading killer of children, and we know that boosters protect children, but changing the way people buckle their children up is difficult.

What do I think Congress can do? 2 main things:

1. Congress should promote booster laws in each state. These laws should require children to be in boosters from the time they outgrow a forward-facing car seat until they are large enough to sit safely using the vehicle lap/shoulder belt. So far, just three states, Washington, California, and Arkansas have booster laws. Many other states have introduced booster bills but have not been successful. I was part of the recent unsuccessful effort to pass booster legislation in

Illinois. Congress should consider providing incentives to the states to pass booster laws. Tying the receipt of state highway funds to passing a booster law is one mechanism. Booster laws will protect children. Less children will be injured and less children will be killed when it becomes illegal to ride without a booster.

2. Congress should support the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to lead an intensive and prolonged public education campaign to promote booster seats. The recent booster promotion efforts by NHTSA and the National SAFE KIDS campaign have been significant, but much more needs to be done. We are talking here about changing a social norm, changing the way virtually everyone buckles up this group of children. While it is a huge undertaking, safety promotion on this scale has been done successfully before. Twenty five years ago, just a handful of infants and toddlers used car seats. Today, usage in these two groups is over 90%. We can promote boosters, and we will see increased use of boosters. How quickly that happens will, in part, depend on the degree of federal investment in promoting boosters now.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to testify here today. I look forward to the day when parents would not think of taking a trip without their child in a booster. Getting booster use to be that

common can be achieved through booster laws and intensive and sustained public education. I would be happy to answer any questions you and the members of the subcommittee may have.