

PREPARED STATEMENT OF STEPHANIE ERDMAN
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Hearing (11/20/14):
“Examining Takata Airbag Defects and the Vehicle Recall Process”

Ashley Parham. Gurjit Rathore. Hai Ming Xu. And my name is Lt. Stephanie Erdman.

Thanks to the gracious invitation of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, I am honored to be here today to serve as the voice for the people who have been forever silenced because of the failure of companies to address the dangers of exploding airbags.

On behalf of everyone who has suffered because of these defective airbags, I would like to thank the Committee for holding this hearing. It is my sincere hope that no other families will have to go through the terrible ordeal that my family has had to endure because of what happened to me or experience the same kind of terror that myself and others who have been injured and killed because of these defective airbags have felt.

On September 1, 2013, my life changed forever. I was driving my 2002 Honda Civic on Highway 98 West near Destin, Florida on my way to get some groceries with a friend. As I was driving, a car turned left in front of my Honda and we crashed.

When the impact occurred, shrapnel from my car’s airbag inflator shot through the airbag cloth and embedded in my right eye and neck. I was instantly blind on my right side. And then I felt gushing blood. It was terrifying. I thought I was going to bleed out.

When I got to the hospital, they did a CT of my face. The imaging showed that a metallic foreign body had punctured and fractured my right nasal bone, and the tip of that shrapnel had embedded itself in my right sinus. Since that day, I have endured multiple surgeries and therapy. I have more of them to go. My vision will never be the same. I will never be the same.

An accident only has to involve a mild impact to trigger the airbags to deploy. My accident involved a moderate frontal impact. I should have gotten a few bumps and bruises like the passenger in my car. I should not have been injured in the shocking and terrifying way that I was.



What happened to me was gruesome. The photo that the EMT took of me with the shrapnel in my eye is scary to look at. But I believe it is necessary to get the attention of those who have the ability to do something to stop this from happening to someone else.

It is important to me to talk about this problem. It is helpful to me to talk about it so that I can learn to deal with the trauma that I had to endure and that still haunts me to this day. Just like I am haunted by what could have happened if a family member or a friend was driving my car. I could never forgive myself if this had happened to one of them in my car.

It is easy to think that I am the only one who has suffered because of my accident. But it has also been exceptionally tough for my family. They try to be strong for me, and I see it. But I can tell that, whenever I talk about it, they are also hurting. I know that I have physical scars from my tragedy. But the people who care about me have scars, too. They are just the kind you cannot see.

These companies say they have done everything they could. They claim that they notified consumers as soon as they found out about the problem. That they expanded the recalls as they learned about each set of additional potentially affected vehicles just as soon as they could. I believe the facts show differently.

It has been six years since the first recall covering these deadly airbags. What started with just 3,940 vehicles has now ballooned into more than seven million vehicles on the roads in the United States. But the exact same vehicle in one state is not even recalled in the state next door. I do not understand how that is acceptable. I do not understand how a company can take the position that just crossing a border means that the vehicle somehow becomes safe.

I also do not understand why the dealerships that sell and service these vehicles are not notifying consumers. American Honda Motor Company claims that they notified the Honda-certified dealership where I bought my Civic about the recall for the driver's side airbag in February of 2010. I took my car into that dealership for service three times after they received the recall notice for my car. They never told me about the recall. They never performed the recall repair on my vehicle. And they never warned me about what might happen if my airbag deployed.

I have also learned that Honda claims they sent a recall notice to my house in 2010. They claim that they have records showing that the envelope with that critical notice was returned to them as undeliverable. Instead of trying to notify me another way, they did nothing to warn me. They did nothing to try and make sure that me and my family were safe before the accident happened. It was not until September 4, 2013—three days after my accident—that Honda called and left a message on my phone about the recall.

It is in honor of my family and friends, whose support means so very much to me, that I ask the Committee to demand real answers to questions like these from Takata and from the auto manufacturers that knew about this problem long before it began ruining lives and taking lives.

It is in honor of the families and friends of all those who have been injured by these defective airbags that I ask the Committee to insist that these companies explain why they waited so long to identify all of the potentially deadly vehicles.

And it is in honor of those who cannot be here today because they have been hurt or killed by these dangerous products that I ask the Committee to get to the bottom of why these companies did not try harder to warn us about this issue as soon as possible so that no one else suffers the consequences of their inaction.

I believe in personal responsibility. I believe in admitting that you are wrong when you are wrong. I believe in holding companies accountable for their actions. The safety of the American public was not held paramount by these companies. These companies did not play by the rules when they failed to timely and fully notify NHTSA and customers like me about this defect. Something must be done to stop this deadly trend that we see time and time again in the auto industry. I am hopeful that NHTSA's recall management division also takes more responsibility for overseeing recall campaigns so that they improve completion rates and make sure that all affected vehicles are included.

I am so honored to be here today and to have the opportunity to tell my story. But please understand that I am just one of many people, along with their families and friends, who have suffered because of these defective airbags.

I am hopeful that Congress will look at ways to improve the recall notification process. I hope there will be no more mothers taken from their children or fathers blinded so they can never again truly enjoy playtime with their sons. But I worry that, once all of the attention that is now focused on these deadly products subsides, these companies will not follow through with making sure that the defective airbags in every last one of these affected vehicles are removed. I ask that the Committee do everything in its power to make sure that each and every vehicle affected by this defect is made safe.

Thank you.