

In Support of Mandatory Body Armor and Seatbelt Wear Policies

November 20, 2014

Each year, traffic accidents and firearms-related incidents are the leading causes of death among law enforcement officers who are killed in the line of duty.¹ When an officer is killed or injured, it is devastating to families, fellow officers, the police department, and the community as a whole. Although it is impossible to prevent all officer deaths and injuries, as a profession we must do all we can to keep officers safe.

This is why Attorney General Eric Holder, through the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Policing Services, suggested convening police executives and labor leaders to examine how we can partner to protect our law enforcement officers from the dangers they face each day. As part of this effort, police and labor leaders came together and agreed that improving officer safety begins with reducing the number of officers who are killed or injured each year in traffic accidents and shooting incidents.

In 2013, 59 of the 100 officers killed in the line of duty were killed in automobile crashes or shootings, according to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund.² Traffic-related incidents were the **number one cause** of officer fatalities 13 of the last 15 years.³ Preliminary reports for 2014 indicate that deaths due to these causes increased since last year.⁴

Body armor and seatbelts have been proven to save lives and help reduce injuries to officers. Yet officers' use of body armor and seatbelts remains dangerously uneven. Research shows that:

- Between 2003 and 2012, **36%** of the officers who were feloniously killed in the line of duty were not wearing body armor.⁵
- When it is worn, body armor is effective. Since 1987, more than **3,000** law enforcement officers have survived life-threatening injuries because they were protected by body armor.⁶ In one year alone, protective vests were directly attributable to saving the lives of at least **33** law enforcement and corrections officers.⁷
- Seatbelt use among law enforcement officers is well below that of the general public. Studies indicate that seatbelt wear among the general public is at **86%**,⁸ whereas it is estimated that roughly **half** of all officers do not wear seatbelts while on duty.⁹

¹ National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, Causes of Law Enforcement Deaths <http://www.nleomf.org/facts/officer-fatalities-data/causes.html>.

² Ibid.

³ National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, Drive Safely Campaign. <http://www.nleomf.org/programs/drive/>.

⁴ National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, Preliminary 2014 Fatality Statistics. <http://www.nleomf.org/facts/officer-fatalities-data/>.

⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2012 Law Enforcement Officers Killed & Assaulted. http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/leoka/2012/officers-feloniously-killed/felonious_topic_page_-2012.

⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Bulletproof Vest Partnership Initiative (Updated May 2014). <http://ojp.gov/bvpbasi/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Seat Belt Use in 2013—Overall Results (January 2014). <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811875.pdf>.

⁹ Below 100 Campaign, <http://below100.com/below-100-frequently-asked-questions/>; For police, not wearing seat belts can be fatal mistake (October 14, 2012), *Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/for-police-not-wearing-seat-belts-can-be-fatal-mistake/2012/10/14/78a8dd10-f207-11e1-892d-bc92fee603a7_story.html.

- In 2012, 10 of the 26 (**38%**) officers killed in automobile crashes were not wearing seatbelts at the time of the incident.¹⁰ Over the past three decades, **42%** of the officers killed in automobile crashes were not wearing seatbelts.¹¹

This is why we support the mandatory use of body armor and seatbelts in all law enforcement agencies, and why we are calling upon all law enforcement executives and labor leaders to join in this effort. It is critical that police leaders and employee representatives work together to adopt and enforce sensible mandatory wear policies and to develop strategies that will increase the use of body armor and seatbelts among officers.

Our support for mandatory wear policies is conditioned on the following:

1. Failure to comply with the policy should **not** be used by any police agencies or government entities as a basis for denying death or disability benefits to officers or their families.
2. The language in some federal and state disability laws states that officers may be denied benefits if their deaths or injuries are caused by their intentional misconduct or gross negligence, or if their actions were a substantial contributing factor to the death or injury. We believe that this language should be amended to state that the failure to wear body armor or a seatbelt does **not** constitute the type of intentional misconduct, gross negligence, or substantial contributing factor that would warrant denial of benefits.
3. Police executives should work closely with their employee associations and unions when developing mandatory wear policies, and officers should be involved in testing and selecting equipment.
4. Law enforcement agencies should provide their officers with up-to-date equipment that meets all applicable safety requirements. This includes ensuring that agency vehicles are in good working condition and making best efforts to provide the newest and best vehicles possible.
5. Police executives and labor leaders should work together to develop strategies for increasing the use of body armor and seatbelts among officers. This includes: selecting body armor that is climate-appropriate, individually tailored, and meets gender-specific needs; providing tactical training on safe seatbelt usage; and implementing educational campaigns on the importance of wearing body armor and seatbelts.

By working together to enact mandatory wear policies and to encourage body armor and seatbelt use among officers, police executives and labor leaders can make a difference. We owe it to our officers, their families, and our communities to do all we can to keep our officers safe. **We believe that mandating body armor and seatbelts can cut the number of officers who die in auto accidents and shootings by nearly half** – that is why we have come together to support this important resolution and encourage other forward-thinking leaders to do the same.

¹⁰ National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, Changing the Culture of Safety (June 2013). http://www.nleomf.org/assets/pdfs/nhtsa/NSA-Traffic-Safety-Committee-June-2013_NHTSA-web-version.pdf.

¹¹ Ibid.