November 28, 2018

Dear Senator:

We are writing to convey our strong opposition to the AV START Act (S. 1885). The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recently released 2017 data that revealed 37,133 people were killed on our Nation’s roads and highways. To address this public health crisis, the Senate should take immediate action to require proven advanced safety technologies in all new cars, not rush forward with unproven technologies that put automakers’ interests ahead of public safety. Nonetheless, legislation with significant safety flaws and omissions, the AV START Act, is being raced through the Senate under the guise of advancing safety, despite not even requiring autonomous vehicles (AVs) to meet all of today’s safety standards.

In fact, there is no evidence that AVs, also known as driverless cars, will be safer than human drivers. Industry has yet to prove the safety of these experimental systems and has yet to even agree upon a metric or method for comparing safety, yet they are pushing to allow millions of these vehicles onto the roads.

To be clear, our organizations support innovation and hope that the promises of improved safety, expanded mobility and reduced pollution, among others touted by AV manufacturers, are achieved. Our position of urging the Senate to require advanced safety technologies demonstrates this commitment and will also help pave the way for driverless cars. However, the AV START Act does not even sufficiently address known problems revealed by the dangerous and deadly crashes involving vehicles equipped with highly and partially automated driving systems that have occurred since the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation held its markup last year. Some of these incidents are under open investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). These real-world experiences are proof of why AV legislation needs to include the following vital safeguards. The bill should:

- Limit the size and scope of exemptions for vehicles that can be sold without meeting crucial federal government safety standards. The AV START Act would allow for potentially millions of exempt vehicles to be sold, not just used for testing.
- Direct the United States Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT) to issue minimum standards for driverless cars, including securing driverless systems from hacking, as well as establishing performance requirements for what the vehicle can “see,” electronics systems, and the handoff between computer and human driver. Also, in the absence of federal regulation, states should not be preempted from protecting their citizens.
- Provide the public, NHTSA, and NTSB with adequate information and data as to the limitations, capabilities, and real-world performance of driverless cars.
- Maintain current law, which prohibits manufacturers from turning off vehicle safety systems at their sole discretion.
- Address the serious safety shortcomings of partially automated, SAE Level 2 vehicles.
- Assure that driverless cars will be safe and accessible to traditionally underserved communities, including people with disabilities.
- Ensure NHTSA has sufficient resources and the authorities it needs to effectively oversee driverless cars as they are deployed on a large scale.
We fear that without these commonsense changes, our already dangerous roads will become more perilous with a mixed fleet of traditional cars and unproven, under-regulated AVs together with other road users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists, wheelchair users, emergency responders, construction workers and others. This could lead an already highly skeptical public to further sour on the concept of AVs, endangering their future potential.

The flaws in the AV START Act are compounded by the insufficient action of the U.S. DOT. Just last month, another iteration of voluntary driverless car guidelines was released. This “hands off” approach of the federal government will leave consumers at the peril of an auto industry with a recent history of some companies putting defective products like faulty ignition switches and exploding airbags on the market. Allowing driverless cars to be deployed on the scale contemplated by the AV START Act while NHTSA stands on the sidelines would be misguided at best and reckless and deadly at worst.

The artificial urgency to pass this bill belies the reality that broad deployment of driverless cars is likely decades away, according to numerous senior-level executives of companies that make AVs. Moreover, the U.S. will retain its position of strength and not fall behind other countries if this bill isn’t enacted. In fact, U.S. policies are actually more lax compared to the international community, which has generally taken a more measured approach with respect to testing. These false premises must be rejected.

If the AV START Act sufficiently addressed identified concerns, we would champion its advancement because of all the benefits these vehicles could provide if developed safely. Unfortunately, it does not, and we must strongly urge you to oppose it.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Catherine Chase, President
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety

Bill Nesper, Executive Director
The League of American Bicyclists

J. Thomas Manger, Chief of Police
Montgomery County Police Department
President, Major Cities Chiefs Association

Curt Decker, Executive Director
National Disability Rights Network

Joan Claybrook, President Emeritus
Public Citizen and Former NHTSA Administrator

Georges C. Benjamin, MD, Executive Director
American Public Health Association

Ralf Hotchkiss, Co-Founder
Whirlwind Wheelchair International

Amy Colberg, Director of Government Affairs
Brain Injury Association of America

Michael Aitken, P.E., F.NSPE, President
National Society of Professional Engineers

Kate Kraft, Executive Director
America Walks

Bill Nesper, Executive Director
The League of American Bicyclists

Traycee Biancamano, CEO and President
United States First Responders Association
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeff Solheim</td>
<td>2018 President</td>
<td>Emergency Nurses Association</td>
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<td>Christopher Michetti, MD</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>American Trauma Society</td>
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<td>Jason Levine</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Center for Auto Safety</td>
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<td>William J. Johnson</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>National Association of Police Organizations</td>
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<td>Colonel James J. Mendonca</td>
<td>Chief of Police, Central Falls, Rhode Island</td>
<td>Rhode Island Police Chiefs’ Association</td>
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<td>Mark Plotz</td>
<td>Conference Director</td>
<td>National Center for Bicycling &amp; Walking</td>
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<td>President</td>
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<td>Director</td>
<td>Safe Climate Campaign</td>
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<td>Rosemary Shahan</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety</td>
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<td>Marco Conner</td>
<td>Deputy Director</td>
<td>Transportation Alternatives</td>
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<td>John M. Simpson</td>
<td>Privacy and Technology Director</td>
<td>Consumer Watchdog</td>
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<td>Dorian Grilley</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steve Owings</td>
<td>Co-Founder</td>
<td>Road Safe America</td>
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<td>Alexey Davies</td>
<td>Membership Director</td>
<td>Community Cycles</td>
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<td>Cathy DeLuca</td>
<td>Policy &amp; Program Director</td>
<td>Walk San Francisco</td>
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<td>David Friedman</td>
<td>Vice President, Advocacy</td>
<td>Consumer Reports</td>
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<td>Jack Gillis</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Consumer Federation of America</td>
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<td>Andrew McGuire</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Trauma Foundation</td>
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<td>Scott Bricker</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Bike Pittsburgh</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melissa Wandall</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>National Coalition for Safer Roads</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nancy Tibbett</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Bicycle Indiana</td>
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<td>Tim Young</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Wyoming Pathways</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dennis Strawn</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>West Virginia Connecting Communities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stephen W. Hargarten</td>
<td>M.D., MPH</td>
<td>Society for the Advancement of Violence and Injury Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Jeanna Matthews</td>
<td>Associate Professor of Computer Science</td>
<td>Clarkson University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kennerly H. Digges</td>
<td>President</td>
<td>Automotive Safety Research Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>John M. Simpson</td>
<td>Project Director, Consumer Watchdog</td>
<td>National Consumers League</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sarah Clark Stuart</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia</td>
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<td>Jacob VanSickle</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Bike Cleveland</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elliott Caldwell</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>Georgia Bikes</td>
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Ron Burke, Executive Director  
Active Transportation Alliance

Phil Sarnoff, Executive Director  
Bike Utah

Julie Harris, Executive Director  
Nebraska Bicycling Alliance

Daphne Izer, Co-Founder and Chair  
Parents Against Tired Truckers

Cara Spencer, Executive Director  
Consumers Council of Missouri

Jennifer Tierney, Board Member  
CRASH Foundation

Becky Afonso, Executive Director  
Florida Bicycling Association

Pat Krebs, Executive Director  
Lebanon Valley Bicycle Coalition

Dawn King, President  
Truck Safety Coalition

Stacy Thompson, Executive Director  
LivableStreets Alliance

Allison Blanchette, Executive Director  
Long Island Streets

Paul Winkeller, Executive Director  
New York Bicycling Coalition

Jay Ferm, Director of Advocacy  
Planet Bike

Tom Francis, Deputy Director  
MassBike

Steven Hardy-Braz  
East Carolina Cycling Club

Cyndi Steiner, Executive Director  
New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition

Amy Johnson Ely, Executive Director  
Palmetto Cycling Coalition

Doug Habermann, Executive Director  
Bike Walk Montana

Linda Sherry, Director of National Priorities  
Consumer Action

Wanda Lindsay, Founder  
The John Lindsay Foundation

Brent Hugh, Executive Director  
Missouri Bicycle & Pedestrian Federation

Peter Malarczyk  
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY  
Volunteer, Truck Safety Coalition

Alex Alston  
Cascade Bicycle Club and Washington Bikes

Injured in a truck crash 12/29/15  
Son of Ryszard and Anita Malarczyk

Dr. Rick Allen  
President, Trout Lake Business Association

Monica Malarczyk  
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY  
Volunteer, Truck Safety Coalition

Director, Mt. Adams Country Bicycle Tour

Injured in a truck crash 12/29/15  
Son of Ryszard and Anita Malarczyk

Patrick Conlon, President  
BikeJC

Killed in a truck crash 12/29/15

Ed Barsotti, Chief Programs Officer  
Ride Illinois
Michelle Novak
Delevan, NY
Volunteer, Truck Safety Coalition
Aunt of Charles “Chuck” Novak
Killed in a truck crash 10/24/10

Kate Brown
Gurnee, IL
Volunteer, Truck Safety Coalition
Mother of Graham Brown
Injured in a truck crash 5/2/05

Debra Cruz
Harlingen, TX
Volunteer, Truck Safety Coalition
Injured in a truck crash 8/8/2008

Morgan Lake
Sunderland, MD
Volunteer, Truck Safety Coalition
Injured in a truck crash 7/19/13

Tami Friedrich Trakh
Corona, CA
Board Member, CRASH
Sister of Kris Mercurio, Sister-in-Law of Alan Mercurio,
Aunt of Brandie Rooker & Anthony Mercurio
Killed in a truck crash 12/27/89

Jane Mathis
St. Augustine, FL
Vice President, TSC
Board Member, PATT
Mother of David Mathis
Mother-in-Law of Mary Kathryn Mathis
Killed in a truck crash 3/25/04

Linda Wilburn
Weatherford, OK
Board Member, PATT
Mother of Orbie Wilburn
Killed in a truck crash 9/2/02

Randall Higginbotham
Memphis, TN
Volunteer, Truck Safety Coalition
Father of Michael Higginbotham
Killed in a truck crash, 11/18/14