

**ADDRESSES:** Applications must be submitted to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Office of Contracts and Procurement (NPO-220), ATTN: Maxine D. Edwards, 400 7th Street, SW., Room 5301, Washington, DC 20590. All applications submitted must include a reference to NHTSA Program #NTS-01-3-05149.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:**

General administrative questions may be directed to Maxine D. Edwards, Office of Contracts and Procurement at (202) 366-4843. Programmatic questions relating to this grant program should be directed to Ann Mitchell, Occupant Protection Division (NTI-112), NHTSA, 400 7th Street, SW., Washington, DC 20590, by e-mail at [amitchell@nhtsa.dot.gov](mailto:amitchell@nhtsa.dot.gov), or by phone at (202) 366-2690. Interested applicants are advised that no separate application package exists beyond the contents of this announcement.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**

**Background**

In 1996, the U.S. Department of Transportation commenced a national initiative to increase safety belt use nationwide called the Buckle Up America Campaign.<sup>1</sup> Since the start of the campaign, the national safety belt use rate has steadily climbed from 68 percent in 1996 to 75 percent in 2002. By 1999—a year ahead of schedule—the campaign had achieved its goal of reducing occupant fatalities in children ages 0–4 years by 15 percent. This success was a direct result of efforts by the many partners who joined the Buckle Up America Campaign and supported the campaign's initiatives. Despite significant gains, continued work is needed to reach the remaining 25 percent of Americans who still do not buckle up. NHTSA has established a target of 79 percent safety belt use by 2004. Meeting this goal will require an intense effort to persuade hardcore nonusers to change their behavior.

Rural populations are among the groups at higher risk of being killed in a crash, as are teens, minorities, and pickup truck drivers and passengers. NHTSA statistics show that traffic crashes, injuries, and fatalities occur with much higher frequency in rural areas than in urban areas. Factors such as higher alcohol-related crash rates, lower safety belt use, higher speeding crash rates and less accessibility to emergency services all contribute to the disparity. In 2001, 25,737 traffic related fatalities occurred in rural areas—61 percent of all traffic fatalities. Rural areas, however, account for only 39 percent of the vehicle miles traveled

and only 21 percent of the population nationwide. In 2001, the rural fatality rate remains double that of the urban rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT).<sup>2</sup>

These crash and fatality statistics illustrate why the rural population is a high-risk group that has been targeted by Congress for assistance. Yet, the highway safety community has not developed an approach that effectively incorporates rural America into its highway safety program. Administrative resources and programmatic goals often work against support for rural initiatives by focusing activity in high population/high crash rate areas. Rural communities individually do not have the data to support targeted funding in a small community; however, collectively, they encompass the majority of the crashes, injuries and fatalities on the road.

Across the board, safety belt use is lowest among young adults ages 16 to 24 years old and by occupants of pickup trucks. Safety belt use in pickup trucks is considerably lower (54 percent) in rural areas than in urban areas (69 percent).<sup>3</sup> High-speed crashes play a role in the disparity, with 70 percent of fatal crashes at 55 MPH or higher occurring in rural areas.<sup>4</sup> Studies reveal that survival from car crashes in rural areas depends on a number of factors, including crash dynamics, time to discovery and the degree of organization of EMS and trauma system resources.<sup>5</sup>

Though NHTSA studies show that enactment and enforcement of a primary safety belt law comprise a proven methodology to increase safety belt use, rural America faces challenges in implementing this approach, and rural secondary States even more so. Law enforcement officials in rural communities are often elected officials and thus reluctant to write traffic tickets. Due to limited resources, inadequate manpower, and lack of community support for strong enforcement, rural communities are less engaged in coordinated national, state and local safety belt enforcement campaigns such as the Operation ABC (America Buckles Up Children) Mobilizations, *Click It or Ticket*.<sup>6</sup> These campaigns have proven successful in increasing safety belt use;<sup>7,8</sup> however, rural America has not fully embraced the enforcement concept, nor have traditional program delivery systems been successful in reaching rural communities.

The problem of increasing safety belt use in rural communities needs a solution. Changing social norms in rural America is a difficult task that will require an understanding of the

perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes of rural Americans. Messages and programs designed for “mainstream America” often are not effective for those populations most at risk or hardest to reach. Language, cultural, and other barriers must play a role in the development of tailored messages and alternate delivery channels. Increasing usage rates in this population will require the leadership, support and cooperation of respected organizations that represent and advocate on behalf of rural Americans, with the credibility and knowledge to influence their members and constituencies to buckle up. Engaging the rural residents themselves to take responsibility in addressing this issue also will be key to the success of the highway safety community's efforts.

This approach has been tested and proven effective in both urban and rural communities. Community Traffic Safety Programs and Safe Communities Coalitions<sup>9,10</sup> have been active throughout the nation for a number of years. NHTSA also partnered with the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) to demonstrate the “Partners for Rural Traffic Safety” community-based approach. Fifteen projects conducted in 1997–1998 resulted in an average nine percentage-point increase in safety belt use. NRHA and NHTSA produced the *Partners for Rural Traffic Safety Action Kit*<sup>11</sup> based on the demonstration projects and their community approach. Information on how to obtain copies of the sources cited herein (and other relevant resources) is set forth below, in the “Additional Resources” section of this announcement.

**Goal**

The goals of this demonstration program are to test viable delivery mechanisms for administering traffic safety programs in rural communities and to engage rural communities in activities to increase safety belt use. We are seeking organizations/agencies that will take a leadership role in serving as a focal point for traffic safety program delivery to/within the community. The success of the effort will be measured in terms of:

- Changes in safety belt use rates;
- increases in enforcement activities;
- ability to coordinate, monitor, and publicize activity and serve as a focal point for information;
- ability to engage the community in the program, provide education and training, and to work closely with law enforcement and other community service providers on planning, data collection, and evaluation;