

**Testimony of Congressman John Lewis (D-GA) on the
Motor Vehicle Safety Provisions in House and Senate Highway Bills before the House Energy and
Commerce Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade**

March 22, 2012

Good morning, Madam Chair, Ranking Member Butterfield, and Members of the Committee. I would like to thank you all for the opportunity to testify today.

On March 2, 2007, an accident occurred in my congressional district which shook the nation to its core. A chartered bus careened off a closed exit and crashed onto highway I-75 in Atlanta, Georgia. The driver mistakenly drove up an exit ramp. When he attempted to break, the driver lost control. The bus swerved off the exit, flipped over the rail at the top of the intersection, and crashed onto the below freeway.

My staff and I joined the entire nation in watching the news coverage of emergency responders desperately attempting to save the lives of the Bluffton University baseball team, the driver, and his wife. It was heartbreaking. The team was treated at Grady Memorial Hospital, the major trauma center for Metro Atlanta, Atlanta Medical Center, and Piedmont Hospital. Seven of the thirty-five passengers lost their lives on that terrible day. A university, a community, parents, teachers, teammates, and friends mourned. News outlets across the country asked, "Why did this happen? How can we prevent this from occurring again?"

A few days later, I received a phone call from Dr. Jeffrey Salomone, one of the leading surgeons who treated the players. He was outraged and frustrated – demanding that I do something. As the leading surgeon who operated on the Bluffton victims, he knew that he could have saved more lives if the passengers had not been thrown from their seats, and ejected from the bus. He explained their painful effort -- trying desperately to save lives and do patchwork that would have been so much simpler if only their patients had been protected by seatbelts. Dr. Salomone knew that countless lives across the country could have been saved if Congress had acted years ago, and established safety standards for motorcoach buses. He was furious at our inaction. The doctor knew what his job was, and he demanded that we do ours.

I responded immediately. First, I reached out to Chairman Olver and the Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development Appropriations Subcommittee to request report language from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) on national standards to reduce complete and partial ejections in buses. In the meantime, there was yet another accident, and another tragedy.

As a nation, we keep learning the hard way that motorcoach accidents are rare, but when they do occur, the consequences are devastating. When I heard that Senator Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-TX) introduced a bipartisan response, the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act (MESA), I reached out to sponsor the House companion. It was the least I could do. In preparing to introduce the House-version of the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act, I learned that, like seatbelts in cars, the National Transportation Safety Board had recommended time and time again for stronger, comprehensive motorcoach bus safety standards.

I was shocked to learn how far behind we were on this basic issue. You can find seatbelts on motorcoach buses all around the globe, but not here in the U.S. -- the leading country of developed world. Why is that? Congress has had decades to think, study, and review. It is simply unconscionable to think that we can wait one more minute, one more day, or one more month to act.

Any delay will just bring more headlines, more victims, and more tears. Since that terrible day in Atlanta, there have been 120 accidents across the country. Some are noted in quick blurbs on local news. But others -- like the tragedies in Sherman, Texas, the Bronx, New York, East Brunswick, New Jersey, High Point, North Carolina, or most recently in Clinton, Montana -- shake our very core.

For me, buses are very personal, very important. I grew up taking motorcoach buses -- in Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Dr. Martin Luther King sent me a bus ticket to meet him for the first time, and later I joined thousands of Freedom Riders to desegregate interstate commerce. I know all too well that buses are the lifeline of our nation, a major means of transportation for all Americans -- sporting teams, students, and tourists -- in every corner of our country. Is it wrong to push for them to be safe?

This Committee and the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee have held multiple hearings on this important issue; I know that you take safety very seriously. My good friend and our former colleague, Secretary LaHood has made safety a national transportation priority -- acting on cell phone use, texting, and motorcoach safety -- to the best of his authority. Our bill gives the administration a comprehensive plan and the authority to make motorcoaches safe.

Senators on both sides of the aisle have tried repeatedly to push this bill forward. Every time an accident occurs in their home states, their constituents demand action. I commend the Senate on their inclusion of the Motorcoach Enhanced Safety Act in the surface transportation reauthorization bill. Recently, my good friend and colleague, Congressman Ted Poe from Texas, joined me in offering an amendment to H.R. 7 to ensure that the House bill included equally high motorcoach safety standards.

This is one of those issues, where we just need to put partisan politics aside and get it done. The motorcoach industry has had decades to make their fleets safer, and time is up. Congress needs to act now. You can get on a bus and have access to wireless service and outlets, but not a seatbelt? Your window is not crash-proof. The roof is not crush-resistance, and the list goes on and on.

I hope that you will support this bipartisan, bicameral effort. Trust me; you do not want to be on the receiving end of a phone call from a doctor, a parent, a survivor, or a child who has lost a patient or their loved one in a preventable motorcoach tragedy. I hope and pray that any bill that this Committee puts on the Floor will send an unmistakable message that the U.S. House of Representatives -- the body of the people -- speaks in a clear voice for safety.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today.