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## SCAN TEAM REPORT

NCHRP Project 20-68A, Scan 12-03

# Advances in Safety Program Practices in Zero-Fatalities States

*Supported by the*

National Cooperative Highway Research Program

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# Executive Summary

This document describes the results of Domestic Scan 12-03, Advances in Safety Program Practices in Zero-Fatalities States, conducted as part of National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) Project 20-68A U.S. Domestic Scan Program, to investigate advances in safety program practices in states with a “zero-fatalities” philosophy or vision. The purpose of each scan and of the program as a whole is to facilitate information sharing and technology exchange among the states and other transportation agencies regarding effective new practices and thereby to accelerate innovation among agencies.

Reducing the numbers of fatalities and serious injuries incurred on the nation’s roadways is a continuing objective of state transportation agencies. A number of states in recent years have adopted as the basis for their safety programs the principle that no traffic-related fatalities are acceptable, that “zero deaths” on the state’s transportation system is their ultimate goal. Among other organizations, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), and more than 40 states have endorsed a “Toward Zero Deaths” (TZD) terminology for communicating about this vision and programs designed to improve road safety. While none would argue that even one death on the roads is acceptable, some people remain skeptical of zero deaths as a viable management goal.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) requires that each state develop a Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP), a multiyear, statewide-coordinated, comprehensive framework for reducing highway fatalities and serious injuries on all public roads. While it is the state departments of transportation (DOTs) that are mandated by FHWA with the responsibility for the SHSP, development and pursuit of the SHSP are meant to bring together and engage the public safety, public health, law enforcement, and other agencies, as well as the transportation agency and the public, that together influence road safety. In this report the term “TZD” refers generally to those states and safety programs that have adopted a zero-deaths vision or goal, whether they use that specific term or another.

Scan 12-03 was undertaken to examine experience of states that have adopted a TZD, zero-fatalities vision in their SHSP development and implementation regarding (a) particularly effective road safety planning and programming practices and agency management strategies and (b) evidence of the influence that adopting TZD may have on overall safety management strategies, including SHSP development and implementation. The scan focused on the state DOTs and other state agencies, but considered as well local-agency activities and public engagement to reach consensus on the importance of road safety and means for enhancing it.

Each scan relies on a small team of experienced practitioners who interact with their peers in leading agencies to identify new practices that may be beneficially adopted by other agencies, then document those practices and their likely benefits, and finally participate in dissemination of this information to colleagues throughout the nation. The 12-03 scan team (Appendices A and B) conducted on-site visits with six DOTs that have adopted TZD: Idaho Transportation Department, Maine DOT, Maryland State Highway Administration, Michigan DOT, South Carolina Department of Public Safety, and Washington State DOT. The team interviewed a seventh state, Minnesota DOT, by telephone. Personnel at each state’s host agency were asked to consider—in advance of the scan team’s visit—a set of “amplifying questions” (see Appendix C) designed to articulate the scan’s objectives and scope and to motivate discussion.

Based on their discussions, the scan team drew conclusions in several topic areas about lessons to be learned and actionable ideas that DOTs might adopt regarding the use of TZD or a similar zero-deaths goal or vision

to improve overall road-system safety performance and the SHSP, which is most states' primary mechanism for funding safety efforts:

- **TZD Vision:** While road safety seldom appears in polls of Americans' most cherished values, there is no disagreement that reducing, if not eliminating, road fatalities is the primary objective of each state's SHSP and other safety management efforts. Nevertheless, the scan team observes that states may vary substantially in their strategies and preferences among activities to pursue this objective. Adopting a zero-fatalities goal or vision as a basis for safety program development and management becomes attractive and feasible when the various stakeholders in a state can be rallied around the principles that every life is important, and moving toward zero fatalities is the only morally acceptable goal. Commitment to this vision from the highest levels of state leadership facilitates its effective integration into the SHSP and implementation of SHSP components.
- **TZD and the SHSP:** As a mandatory foundation and framework for states' road safety programs, a well-developed SHSP facilitates safety improvements, using reliable data and well-defined outcome-oriented activities to pursue agency objectives. A zero-fatalities vision establishes clearly that fatalities are a principal measure of the state's road safety performance and supports agency efforts to (a) craft succinct and effective messages for program branding and marketing; (b) build partnerships among agencies that share responsibility for safety (for example, state police and emergency medical officials); (c) communicate with all stakeholders about road safety initiatives under an umbrella of TZD and raise public awareness of road safety as a matter of public policy; and (d) energize their SHSP process.
- **Leadership and Partnerships:** The scan team observed that TZD or other well-crafted statement of a zero-deaths vision does appear to enhance communication among SHSP participants and between public officials and stakeholders generally. All states participating in the scan had a person or group within the DOT with designated responsibility for SHSP implementation and functional partnerships with other governmental and nongovernmental organizations such as local police and emergency medical services. The unambiguous simplicity of a zero-deaths goal appears to be helpful in making road safety a political priority for top state government officials.
- **Data:** The scan team observed that all states reviewed rely on effective data collection and information management practices to advance fact-based SHSP development and implementation. All states visited emphasized the setting of specific targets for levels and timing of activities undertaken to enhance safety, prioritizing SHSP activities specifically to meet those targets, and periodically reporting progress. Some of the TZD states indicated that DOT data collection and performance reporting have helped the agency provide leadership, strengthened partnerships, and helped to identify programs that were not effective in pursuit of the zero-death vision.
- **Traffic Safety Culture:** The scan team found that some DOTs reported that adoption of a TZD philosophy has contributed to a cultural shift within their agencies and among their partners toward increased individual awareness of road safety concerns and greater individual acceptance of responsibility for improving road safety. These agencies suggested this cultural shift increased staff willingness to try new ideas and to recruit nontraditional partners to pursue safety improvements.

Going forward, states will consider opportunities to improve and strengthen their zero-fatalities efforts. Many programs are already expanding their focus, moving from one of state-level initiatives to include localized strategies, and addressing safety on rural roadways as well as in urban areas. Gaining and sustaining leadership attention in a world of competing priorities will also be key. Growing the base of stakeholders by reaching out to legislators and private sector industries is another opportunity to spread

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the zero-fatalities message. Addressing data integration issues and identifying strategic communications practices will also help all states move forward.

To help promote their findings and recommendations, scan team members developed a dissemination and implementation plan that includes both national- and state-level strategies. Beyond presenting the findings to the scan team's home and host agencies, scan participants plan to share the results at meetings and sessions sponsored by the Transportation Research Board, AASHTO, FHWA, and state DOTs as well as associations representing governance, engineers, and safety professionals. Journal and newsletter articles in print publications as well as online resources will also be considered.