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The Buzz in Springfield by Beatriz Fuentes

My name is Beatriz Fuentes and since losing my daughter Natalie in 2006 in a rollover crash, I have been advocating for the passage of a primary seat belt law in Massachusetts. I've met with firemen, police, doctors, nurses, teachers, school administrators, minority organizations, and civic groups. I reached many thousands more through newspapers, radio and television interviews. This spring I've noticed a momentum shift. People of all ages and backgrounds are voicing their support of a primary seat belt bill – now known as “Natalie’s Bill” -- and our legislators need to take notice.

It's shocking that Massachusetts ranks 48th among states in seat belt compliance. If a primary law were passed, Massachusetts is expected to see an 11 percent increase in seat belt use – that means saving lives and preventing disabilities that are heartbreaking and costly. In addition to saving \$55 million in private health insurance costs, the state would receive \$13.6 million for our roads and highways – that means more jobs and safer traveling.

Some citizens voice their concern that passage of a seat belt bill will result in increased racial profiling. I agree that profiling is an important issue that needs to be addressed. However, seat belts and profiling are two VERY different issues and should be dealt with accordingly. Profiling is not something that just happens in cars; it occurs in our every day activities. Seat belts make us safer – all the time.

Minorities in secondary enforcement states, such as Massachusetts, have a lower rate of seat belt use than the general population. By contrast, in primary enforcement states, such as our neighbor New York, minority seat belt use rates improve significantly. In other words, changing to a primary enforcement law helps eliminate racial disparities in seat belt use, and reduces the risk of death and serious disability in minority populations.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, one in five Hispanic high school students report never or rarely wearing a seat belt. That's far too many of our children put at risk. If Natalie had been wearing her seat belt, she might be here today. I don't want others to suffer, as I have, the needless loss of a loved one.

As William Fitchet, Commissioner of the Springfield Police Department says, “A primary seat belt law will save lives and help prevent catastrophic injuries. It's long overdue.”

Please choose to wear your seat belt -- ABROCHATE (buckle up)! And, ask your legislator to support “Natalie’s Bill” to protect the citizens of our community.

The time for change is now.