

Advocates hope tightened seat belt law in Massachusetts could boost state's near-worst seat belt-wearing rate

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Bay State drivers can only get citations for not wearing a seatbelt if they've been stopped for another offense — but that could soon change.

Driver safety advocates, several legislators and the governor want to allow police officers to pull drivers over for not wearing a seatbelt alone.

“A seatbelt saved my life,” said state Sen. Paul Feeney, D-Foxboro, in an emotional testimony during a Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security hearing Wednesday. In pushing for a “primary enforcement” law for seatbelt wearing, Feeney said “if we can, through carefully crafted legislation, encourage seatbelt use to save lives as it did mine, then we’re making a difference in the commonwealth.”

Feeney relayed the story of how, as a 21-year-old, his car flipped over as he was driving his high school sweetheart, now wife. “The paramedics and first responders that showed up on the scene were sure that nobody survived that accident, yet (when) the car started to flip over, I could feel the seatbelt that I had on literally sucking me to that seat,” he said.

Another testifier had a similar experience, but she was not wearing her seatbelt. Kelly Buttglieri said that she was in her final months of law school and recently married in 1992 when she was hit head-on by a drunken driver. She was in a coma for four days after the accident, suffered short-term memory loss and word retrieval at the time, and still has regular seizures caused by the accident.

“The enactment of this bill is so vital to prevent serious injuries and really specifically brain injuries for motor vehicle accidents,” she said, adding that the funds from citations would go toward head injury services in the state.

Others noted that Massachusetts has among the [lowest](#) seat belt usage rates in the country at 77%, compared to a national average of 91%. Figures from AAA Northeast

show that seat belt rates dropped further in the pandemic, by 3% for white Bay Staters, and 10.8% for Black residents.

“I’ve heard the opposition argument that it should not be government’s place to tell people to wear a seatbelt in their own car, but ... once your vehicle becomes a projectile, and you pose a danger to other folks through your negligent conduct, the government must step in,” said Rep. Jeff Roy, D-Franklin.

He also addressed one of the most persistent counterarguments that has dogged this legislation and [Baker](#) when he proposed this reform earlier this year: racial profiling concerns. Roy suggested including data collection requirements into a redraft of the bill.

Others weren’t buying it. Becca Wolfson, executive director of the Boston Cyclists Union, noted that a similar law to prevent distracted driving has already been unevenly applied across races.

One analysis found that 70% of white drivers in violation of that law were let off with a warning, while only 60% of Black drivers were. Instead, she advocated for an education campaign using stories like Feeney’s and Buttglieri’s. “We see this as a storytelling and a budget issue, not a legislative one,” she said.

In 2001, the Senate approved a primary enforcement bill, and added a similar provision to a transportation bond bill in 2004. The House had tie votes on the issue in 2001 and 2003, with the tie vote preventing the measure from advancing further.

State House News Service contributed to this report.