

HAVING AN IMPACT

The Motorcycle Rights Agenda Is Moving Forward In Government **By Rob Dingman**

Recently, Government Affairs Manager Imre Szauter and I attended a tri-regional motorcycle safety meeting conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Out of the roughly 100 participants, Imre and I were the only representatives of motorcycle enthusiasts. In fact, we were the only non-government (or government contractor) types in attendance. It wasn't just because this meeting was held in our backyard in Columbus, Ohio, that we were invited to attend. We were invited by the Ohio Traffic Safety Office because of the relationships the AMA has developed within the traffic safety community.

Now, I have attended a number of meetings like these over the years, both in my previous life with the AMA as its Washington representative, and as a state highway safety office administrator. These meetings tend to be about what you might expect: A series of presentations from bureaucrats, law enforcement officials and politicians proudly extolling the virtues of programs they have implemented. Beyond the perceived importance of mandatory adult helmet laws, however, there is typically limited discussion of motorcycle safety.

Don't get me wrong. I am and always have been a strong advocate for voluntary helmet use (the AMA position on voluntary helmet use can be viewed at [American Motorcyclist > Rights > Resources > AMA Position Statements](#)). There is so much that has not been done, however, in the area of motorcycle safety because of a bureaucratic fixation on helmet laws. If half the resources and energy that has been put into enacting helmet laws over the years had gone into other safety countermeasures—such as rider education and motorist awareness programs—we would certainly be a lot safer.

This meeting was different, however.

For the first time, there was recognition that there is more to a comprehensive approach to motorcycle safety than the enactment of a mandatory helmet law. NHTSA Region 7 Administrator Romell Cooks began her welcoming remarks by asking the attendees when the last helmet law was enacted. (The answer is August 2004, when Louisiana reinstated a universal motorcycle helmet law.) She made the point that helmet laws weren't popular, and that recent efforts to enact them have, therefore, not been successful. She went on to discuss a variety of motorcycle safety countermeasures that have been employed as part of comprehensive motorcycle safety programs to address the long-term trend of a rising motorcycle fatality rate. There was even one speaker who explained that the increased fatality rate was due in part



to an increase in ridership, a concept that seems to have eluded so many in the safety community.

Clearly, we are having an impact on the motorcycle safety policy discussion. Anyone who has been involved in motorcycle rights knows that this affirmation of what we have been saying for years is progress, albeit small. We have come a long way since having to get Congress to impose a restriction on NHTSA from spending tax dollars lobbying state legislatures.

We must be ever vigilant, however, because it takes a concerted effort over a long period of time to change the culture of the safetycrats.

While this meeting was going on in Ohio, NHTSA was offering law enforcement agencies around the country hundreds of thousands of dollars to set up checkpoints that target motorcyclists. The AMA has communicated to NHTSA that it should fund proven programs that help prevent crashes rather than checkpoints that single out motorcyclists. Our position has been consistent for many years that NHTSA should focus on efforts that decrease the likelihood of crashes from occurring in the first place.

Lately, you've heard us tell the motorcycling community that the threats to our lifestyle and sport are greater than they have ever been. It's true. At the same time, with strength in numbers, we can, and do, make a difference. The AMA thanks you for your support, and we urge you to recruit your non-AMA friends to join us. It's crucial if we are to remain vigilant in the fight to protect our riding freedoms.

Rob Dingman is president and CEO of the AMA.