

REMARKS FOR
JOSEPH SZABO
ADMINISTRATOR
FEDERAL RAILROAD ADMINISTRATION

Illinois Railroad Safety Education & Enforcement
Workshop

September 14, 2009

Chicago, IL

- Good morning everyone. I want to start by thanking the ICC and Chairman Box in particular for inviting me to open this workshop.
- I am especially proud to be here to discuss the tremendous leadership my home State of Illinois has demonstrated in improving safety at highway-rail crossings and along railroad rights-of-way. I've been working on the railroad here since the late 70's and it's pretty amazing how things have turned around.
- I'm a fifth-generation railroader who started with the Illinois Central out of high school in Chicago. During my railroad career, I worked as a switchman, trainman and commuter-rail conductor. I later worked for Metra in Chicago and then served as State Director for UTU in Illinois.
- I have seen firsthand the dreadful impact that crossing collisions and trespasser deaths have on families, communities and railroad employees. The trauma it leaves on the train operator and crew operator is something we live with our entire lives.
- However, I've seen how effective communities, railroads and government agencies working together can reduce the number of these incidents.
- Through the years, accidents at highway rail grade crossings have thankfully improved, and this transformation is a result of the dedication and hard work of people like you here.
- We have a diverse crowd of professionals here dedicated to rail safety, which includes 27 police departments, 3 fire departments, 7 railroads, state and federal agencies, manufacturers and many other people who are motivated and empowered to save lives at highway-rail crossings...and much of this comes from the PEERS program.

- As you all know, the PEERS program has been enormously successful in improving safety in Illinois. But it's worth reminding everyone just how many collisions are avoided – and how many lives have been saved – by the education and enforcement efforts PEERS helped to establish.
- Between 2002, the year before PEERS was enacted, and 2008, the number of collisions at crossings in Illinois decreased by over 13 percent.
- A report by DOT's Volpe Center on a PEERS project at vehicle and pedestrian crossings in Arlington Heights over a 16-month period in 2003 and 2004, found an average reduction in pedestrian violations of 58 percent, and of vehicle violations by 12 percent.
- FRA has contributed approximately \$2.4 million for the ICC for grants to PEERS projects, assisted in the formulation of the Illinois State Action Plan, and funded the Volpe research project I just mentioned.
- Beyond PEERS and the State of Illinois's partnership with the FRA, Illinois has committed itself to crossing safety well beyond what Federal Law requires or what other states with high levels of railroad traffic have done.
- Illinois is a leader in investing state funds on improving crossing safety, to the tune of \$27 million every year.
- In October 2008, Illinois submitted to FRA a detailed action plan that identified crossings within the state where multiple collisions had occurred, and offered specific plans for improving crossing safety in the state. Such action plans are now a requirement, under the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008, for the ten states with the highest total of crossing collisions over the last three years. Illinois will be several steps ahead of those other states because of the leadership of its state government and their safety partners in the railroads and local communities.

- For its part, FRA has committed itself to helping communities across the country replicate the success we've achieved here in Illinois.
- This July, FRA hosted a Research Needs Workshop in Cambridge, Massachusetts, aimed at improving our approach to grade crossing safety. Just as you have with the PEERS program, we prioritized Education and Enforcement, identifying them as two of the six focus areas of the workshop.
- We recently issued a \$200,000 grant to Volpe to help create a community-based anti-trespassing initiative along a seven-mile stretch of South Florida Regional Transportation Authority track in West Palm Beach, Florida, that experienced ten trespass fatalities in just an eight-month span last year.
- The initiative is modeled after Canada's excellent CARE program. CARE stands for Community Analysis Response and Evaluation. This program has aided communities and railroads find common cause in creative ways of eliminating trespassing along railroad rights-of-way.
- As we have done in the past, FRA is continuing to work with Operation Lifesaver to encourage grass-roots efforts to educate citizens – from emergency responders to school children – about the importance of safe and responsible behavior along railroad rights-of-way.
- The Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008 authorized FRA to increase its annual contribution to Operation Lifesaver from \$1.025 million to \$2 million. In part, that increase in funds will assist Operation Lifesaver in implementing a pilot program to address targeted and sustained community outreach.

- Because of that additional funding, Operation Lifesaver will be able to establish special programs targeted at specific locations to state governments for outreach projects.
- Section 207 of the Rail Safety Improvement Act also authorizes FRA to issue grants to State governments for outreach and crossing improvement projects, something our agency hasn't been able to do in the past.
- In recent years, FRA's regional personnel have made creative and fruitful efforts to reach out to such diverse groups as migrant workers, truck drivers, and all-terrain vehicle users, about the need to be aware of the dangers of trespassing on railroad property and ignoring crossing warning devices.
- Since 1994, our highway-rail crossing safety team has increased its regional staff from 8 to 18 full-time personnel. Here in Region 4, Tammy Wagner and Bob Meyer have done excellent work assisting communities in Illinois and its neighboring states to enhance crossing safety.
- Expanding our staff has allowed us to increase our reach into the communities wanting to improve safety along their railroad rights-of-way, and allowing us to tackle the often-neglected problem of trespass deaths.
- The Rail Safety Improvement Act has, for the first time, made it a requirement for all highway-rail crossings in this country to be entered into DOT's Crossing Inventory, and allowed FRA to hold railroads and states accountable for the accuracy of the information in the inventory. Having more complete and current information for the crossings across our country can only benefit us in targeting and remedying the causes of crossing collisions.
- Ron Ries of the FRA will have a more-detailed presentation of the Rail Safety Improvement Act later this morning, so I won't steal more of his thunder. But I do

want to recognize what an important tool it is for achieving our mission of reducing the number of lives that are needlessly disrupted and even ended along our nation's railroads.

- FRA is also pursuing the goal of crossing safety through our role in law enforcement. We view enforcement as one of the most effective tools in reducing deaths at grade crossings and along the rights-of-way.
- FRA is present at a number of conferences for law enforcement professionals, such as the upcoming International Association of Chiefs' of Police annual conference. These conferences help us to emphasize the importance of enforcement of grade crossing and trespass laws as a way to enhance the safety, livability, and mobility of communities.
- We provide important safety information to law enforcement agencies that can keep their officers and communities safe when interacting in a railroad environment.
- One of the most important programs FRA has to strengthen our partnership with the law enforcement community is our Law Enforcement Liaison Program. The program partners active or retired law enforcement officers with FRA's regional offices in order to promote enforcement programs.
- And by the way, though each of our regional offices is authorized a liaison slot, we currently have five of those slots vacant, including Midwest region. So let me take this opportunity to encourage the law enforcement officials here today, and our other safety partners, to help us get the word out about this important program.
- The law enforcement liaison travels throughout the region representing FRA in educating local law enforcement agencies about enforcement initiatives and safety programs for the community and their own officers. This Law Enforcement Liaison

Program has demonstrated the effectiveness of our liaison officer talking “uniform to uniform” to establish instant credibility within the law enforcement community.

- This is a voluntary position that requires the participating liaison’s agency to pay his salary while he or she works 40 hours per month with FRA on these enforcement initiatives. FRA pays any expenses incurred while performing these functions. We are always seeking qualified personnel for these positions.
- We need this type of involvement to help cope with exciting challenges on the horizon.
- The most important of which is on our high-speed rail program, for which you will have the monumental task of managing these rail crossings. Will there be closed corridors? What do we do with private crossings? Or rural crossings with just cross bucks?
- These are issues we face, and through the collaborative work of people like you here in cooperation with IDOT and FRA, we will solve these problems and create a safe environment for high-speed rail.
- We have a draft of a highway-rail grade crossing plan for high speed rail, and we very much welcome you input to create safe operating environments from the outset.
- And through this plan and other efforts, we have to keep on working collaboratively. Between law enforcement, IDOT, ICC, FRA, engineering firms plus the leadership of communities across Illinois, we can make this safe environment happen.
- FRA is trying to build a culture of safety in the railroad industry, and we need your help now more than ever. I hope we can continue to rely on the innovation and

commitment our partners here in Illinois have displayed to serve as an inspiration for saving lives across the country.

- Thank you, and have a great meeting today.