Statement of Jim Portell
Father of Jamie
Killed in a Rollover Crash

On Friday, Oct. 4, 2002, I lost my only child, 15-year-old daughter Jamie, in a rollover SUV crash in Dundee, Florida. Jamie, an energetic and outgoing high school sophomore, was riding in the front passenger seat of a 1995 Chevy Blazer when the 16-year-old driver looked over her right shoulder to make a lane change from the left lane of two-lane northbound U.S. Highway 27. She drifted into the grass median, pulled the wheel to the right to correct it, lost control of the vehicle, and drove it across both lanes into a grassy retention area. The vehicle flipped five times before coming to rest. All five teenage occupants were ejected from the vehicle. None was wearing a seat belt.

Jamie Christine Portell was the only fatality. The driver, who was pinned under the driver's side of the Blazer, suffered a broken leg and underwent emergency surgery. The three backseat passengers were treated for minor injuries at a hospital and released.

Jamie's high school established a safety campaign, called "Buckle up for Safety, Buckle up for Jamie" in which students pledged $1 to the dance team, of which Jamie was a member, and agreed to sign a contractual promise to wear seat belts. In addition, I worked with the school to do a fund-raiser for the dance team. That raised $2,500.

Eight months before the crash, the speed limit on this stretch of highway was increased from 45 mph to 60 mph. Police determined that neither alcohol nor speed were factors in the crash. Jamie was the first fatality on this road since the speed limit had been raised.

We need vehicles that are less likely to roll over when drivers make emergency maneuvers. The bill before Congress would require that, so I am calling on lawmakers to pass it. Just making vehicles less tippy would save so many lives. No one should be killed or lose a loved one because automakers are allowed to market vehicles that are dangerously unstable.

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