



FY 2023 Budget Testimony

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the FY2023 State Budget. My name is Kate O'Connor, and I am a member of the Vision Zero New Jersey Alliance, a coalition of diverse partners, including families impacted by traffic crashes, community members, advocates, policymakers, transportation professionals, public health professionals, and many others. We have come together because every person in New Jersey can and should be able to travel safely each day, without the risk of death or serious injuries on our roadways, no matter how or when they travel.

I joined Families for Safe Streets and Vision Zero Alliance because my brother Jimmy was 25 when he was hit by a distracted speeding driver in a crosswalk outside his apartment. He then suffered for two years with a traumatic brain injury, where he couldn't walk, talk or eat on his own before dying at the age of 27. He was my best friend, I had to watch him slowly die. My family was helpless, and it continues to destroy us almost 10 years later. Since then, I have met far too many families in NJ with similar stories to mine.

My brother Jimmy getting hit was not an accident. This was preventable. New Jersey's roads are not safe, and it is killing us.

- Last year, New Jersey had a record-breaking number of people killed on its roadways. Overall, we lost 701 people in the state – 247 of them were people walking, bicycling, and rolling, the highest number of vulnerable road users killed since 1985.
- This year, unfortunately, we're already on track to see 2021 fatalities surpassed.
- According to the 2021 *Dangerous by Design* report from Smart Growth America, New Jersey is the 21st most dangerous state for pedestrians in the country. This ranking includes controls for population and overall levels of walking.

All of these deaths are preventable: We have the power to achieve zero traffic deaths and serious injuries if we design safe infrastructure, put safety over speed, engage with communities, and build safe systems. A safe system is one that looks beyond user behavior, to create infrastructure that makes the safe choices the best or only choice, and makes continuous improvements driven by data.

Not investing in true safety for people outside of cars is an issue of justice and civil rights.



- For example, despite African-Americans only making up 13% of New Jersey's population, 21% of all pedestrians killed by motor vehicles in New Jersey are Black.
- Safety infrastructure includes ADA compliance, not just with the letter of the law, but the spirit. Often, curb cuts or ramps will exist, but won't connect to a sidewalk - simply a concrete bridge to nowhere, giving anyone using a mobility device no choice but to use the road. No wheelchair user should be forced to roll in the road with cars speeding by - yet this is the reality for many people with disabilities in New Jersey.
- Infrastructure for people biking, walking, and rolling provides safety for those who cannot drive, for affordability or disability reasons, or by choice. This safe infrastructure also reduces crashes for people inside cars.
- A lack of safe alternatives to driving traps and imprisons the most vulnerable residents. Commitment and action is needed to provide freedom of mobility so that everyone can access all the things New Jersey has to offer.

We need to aggressively tackle this issue and we ask the legislature, and ask this Committee to set aside \$750,000¹ as a Vision Zero line item to do the following:

- Support the creation of a Vision Zero Task Force that will work with the New Jersey Department of Transportation and across multiple state agencies to identify actions to implement policies and projects that will make New Jersey's roads safer for all users.
- Develop a public data portal that allows all New Jersey residents access crash location data to better understand the safety issues in their communities.
- Help police departments transition to the New Jersey Safety Portal, the state's new crash data platform to ensure that we have timely and accurate crash data to better inform our capital and safety transportation projects. Currently, only about 20 police departments of the state's 550 have transitioned to this new system.

In addition to funding for vision zero programs, New Jersey must increase staff capacity at NJDOT Office of Safety, Bicycle, and Pedestrian Programs in order to better coordinate efforts throughout the department to focus on the full breadth of transportation needs in the state.

How the state chooses to build its roads means the difference between life and death. Safe roads means more birthdays, more holidays, more memories.

¹ This estimate is based on other states, counties, and municipalities who have comparable programs.



Thank you very much for taking the time to look over this testimony. The Alliance would appreciate the opportunity for a follow-up conversation once the NJDOT capital program funding breakdown is available.