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Campaign History

My Odyssey with Honda

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Makes a Final Ruling

In January 2003, I received a large brown envelope in the mail. Inside was the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's final response to my seat belt petition asking for seat belt extenders and optional longer belts for all vehicles.

Why I started this campaign

Almost five years before NHTSA's response, Mara Nesbitt-Aldrich was on her honeymoon, riding in a borrowed car. There was a crash. Blood and glass were everywhere. Mara broke the windshield with her forehead. Her new husband walked away with hardly a scratch. Mara was riding unbelted because her seat belt was too short. She has permanent brain damage.

Four months after Mara's crash, I am standing in a Honda dealership, on the phone with Honda's National Customer Service department as they tell me you can get a seat belt extender anywhere (well, except from Honda), even at Wal-Mart. The truth is that there are no aftermarket seat belt extenders, not even at Wal-Mart.

What I did initially

A letter to American Honda's president took a month to bounce from Honda's Product Regulatory Department to one Honda attorney, and then a second Honda attorney, to their Consumer Affairs Manager, to a Team Environment Leader for Honda's Consumer Affairs Division, and finally to his supervisor, who ended our last conversation with words I will never forget. *"There is nothing you can do to get Honda to change their policy. Nothing."* I hung up the phone and weighed my options. I had at least two: I could sue Honda, or I could push for a Honda boycott.

I decided not to sue Honda primarily because I hadn't yet been damaged, but also because I couldn't match their deep financial pockets and resources. A boycott would do nothing to help those who already owned Hondas. Besides, Honda didn't want me to buy an Odyssey. They told me so in a certified letter where they offered to help me buy a Toyota instead.

I needed a plan. I needed something that wouldn't be expensive, and that I could do in my spare time at night and on the weekend, preferably using tools I already had. I needed an edge, something that would put me on even ground with Honda. So I proceeded to pick up the biggest hammer I could find--I used the Internet. My friends Frannie and Melissa took pictures with me and a couple of Hondas, and within a few hours after getting the photos developed, I had created my first version of this website. Within a few weeks our picture was on the front page of our local newspaper, along with very positive coverage of my story. I began writing letters, hundreds of them, to the mayor, the governor, Congressmen and women, even Bill Clinton and Al Gore. I wrote the whole Honda Board of Directors, both here and in Japan, I wrote every safety organization I could find. I even wrote Hillary Clinton and Tipper Gore. I spent every spare minute on the Internet, searching for an answer.

How did Honda respond? [Read more about my correspondence with Honda](#)

In their one letter to me, Honda told me that "As required by federal standards, Honda's seat belts are designed to fit 95% of all U.S. adults in any seating position." That wasn't exactly true. I consulted the [Code of Federal Regulation](#) and found out that what the regulation actually said is that automakers are only required to manufacture seat belts that fit people up to the 95th percentile U.S. adult male, who they defined as weighing 215 lbs. This regulation is based on height/weight data from 1962, and was written at a time when we did not fully know the value of seat belts.

I had found the problem and the reason for Honda's refusal to manufacture seat belt extenders. They were following the letter of the law governing the manufacture of seat belt assemblies.

U.S. Senator John Breaux and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

One of the elected officials I wrote was United States Senator John Breaux. He told me that any citizen could petition the [NHTSA](#), asking that a regulation be changed or amended. In April of 2000, I filed a [petition](#) with NHTSA, asking that the existing federal regulation governing the manufacture of seat belts, which only required automakers to manufacture seat belts that fit people up to 215 lbs., be changed. I asked that the new regulation require automakers to make seat belts available for sale, and also make longer seat belts an option at the time of purchase. NHTSA created a docket for public comment on my petition, DMS-NHTSA-2000-7580.

[Click here to see the docket entries on the NHTSA website.](#)

As of 1/7/2016 there are over 1100 entries in NHTSA's public docket, and hundreds of additional letters have been sent to Honda and elected officials.

When I first started this campaign in January, 1999, you could type the phrase "seat belt extenders" in a search engine on the internet and get no meaningful results. Today you get more than 32,000 links to newspaper and magazine articles and to websites, including mine, which has had hundreds of thousands of visitors. Seat belt extenders have also found their place in popular culture. There has been a great deal of positive [media coverage](#) including [USA Today](#), the front page of the [New York Times](#), and a three-page article in [People Magazine](#). More recently it's been discussed in [Time Magazine](#), on the [Today Show](#), and in the [Detroit News](#). There has also been positive coverage in [Automotive Digest](#), the [Midwest City Sun](#), [Australian Women's Forum Magazine](#), [KKNZ Radio](#), [3 On Your Side in Phoenix, AZ](#), the [New Zealand Herald](#), [Car Talk](#), [Honda Beat](#), [The Sun](#), [Automotive Resources International](#), [Berliner Morgenpost](#) in Germany, [KOMO 4 News](#), [KCPQ](#) in Seattle, [Radiance Magazine](#), [Healthy Weight Journal](#), [oooO Baby BABY](#), [Dimensions Magazine](#), [BBW Magazine](#), and [Sondra Solovay's book Tipping the Scales of Justice](#). Reporters from Germany, France, Australia, and Czechoslovakia have interviewed me. Mara Nesbitt Aldrich has been invited twice to speak about this issue at the International Three Flags Safety Belt Campaign. They were so moved by our dilemma that 85 police officers, sheriff deputies and state troopers signed a petition to the NHTSA, asking that automakers be required to provide a means for larger passengers to fasten their seat belts. Jade Starrett has been interviewed on television in Seattle, Lora Holeman has been interviewed several times in Oklahoma, and Lynda Finn has been interviewed in New Zealand. Dennis Miller rants about seat belt extenders in his stand up comedy routine. And Starr Jones, while playing an attorney in an episode of [Strong Medicine](#) on Lifetime TV, was seen dictating to her assistant about "suing the car maker, the dealership, and even the salesman who sold her client a car with seat belts that were too short." She quotes information from my website almost word for word.

■ NHTSA Grants My Petition

In February 2001, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [granted](#) my petition. This means that NHTSA agreed the issues I raised in my petition warrant further discussion.

■ Honda Canada Has Extenders

Remember that phone call I made to American Honda customer service, the phone call that kicked off this whole campaign? The one where they told me they didn't have seat belt extenders? Recently I made another call. The voice at the other end of the phone said, "Honda Canada Customer Service." "Hi," I said. "I'm having a problem with the seat belts in my 1999 Honda Odyssey. They're too short. Do you have extenders?" Yes, she said, we do have seat belt extenders for the 1999 Odyssey. (Unfortunately these Canadian extenders aren't available for Hondas in America or any Honda Odyssey with seat belt pretensioners. Get additional information [here](#).)

■ NHTSA Makes a Ruling

In 2000 I filed a petition with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, asking that the federal regulation governing the manufacture of seat belts be changed so that people of all sizes could fasten their seat belts. NHTSA granted my petition in 2001 and began a study of the issues I raised in my petition. In NHTSA's final ruling, dated January 13, 2003 and titled NHTSA 02-13954, it took eleven pages to summarize their research. The results contain both good and bad.

In my petition, I stated that if a person could physically fit in a vehicle, the person should be able to fasten his or her seatbelt. A simple idea, right? NHTSA's response is that they cannot establish minimum performance requirements for seat belts based on such an imprecise guideline. They said that to develop objective and reasonable guidelines, NHTSA would have to know or estimate the dimensions of the largest vehicle user. NHTSA believes that the most critical measurement is seated hip circumference. The estimated seated hip circumference of the 99th percentile adult person (male or female) is 59 inches. They say that close to 2 million people in the United States are larger than the 99th percentile.

NHTSA surveyed General Motors, Ford, DaimlerChrysler, and Honda and found that these automakers each provide an extra 18-20 inches of belt length for the driver and right front passenger **in 2003 vehicles**. NHTSA calculated that 87.5% of vehicle make/models available today offer consumers either seat belt extenders or longer belts as an option. "Given that many vehicles have belts long enough to fit almost all users and that optional longer belts or seat belt extenders are available for 87.5% of the fleet, the agency believes that a requirement to increase the belt length in all vehicles is unnecessary."

NHTSA says that their decision to terminate this rulemaking does not foreclose opportunities for larger persons to use seat belts that fit. "Both vehicles and vehicle occupants are found in a variety of shapes and sizes. A given vehicle may not be able to accommodate all persons. For reasons other than girth, a vehicle may be unsuitable for some users... Vehicle buyers should take care to be sure that the vehicle they choose is suitable for their needs, including having belts that fit."

I am disappointed that NHTSA did not change the federal regulation to require automakers to provide a means for passengers of all sizes to be able to fasten their seat belt in any vehicle they ride in. However, what they did do is to take my petition seriously, and as a result of that, I believe pressure has been put on automakers to voluntarily increase the length of their seat belts or make seat belt extenders available.

NHTSA has also, for the first time, compiled a list of autos and the length of their seat belts, and they are making that information available [on their website](#).

■ How has [Honda](#) responded to all this?

While I haven't heard anything official from them, Honda has addressed the issue of seat belt length in at least some of their newer vehicles. Recently I test drove a Honda Element with my younger sister Rae. Not only was there more room behind the steering wheel, but I was able to fasten the seat belts with many inches to spare. Others have written to tell me of longer seat belts in newer Honda Accords.

■ Where do we go from here?

Almost every day I receive emails from people who need seat belts, or who have learned about extenders and how to get because of my website. I've gotten heartfelt letters from people whose lives have been saved because they saw my website and got an extender. I've gotten reports from people who now have extenders from Subaru, VW, Daewoo, Infiniti, and Saturn that simply weren't available five years ago.

My website will continue to be a resource to people looking for larger seat belts and I will continue this campaign to help more and more people be able to fasten their seat belts.

I encourage you to [sign the petition](#) urging NHTSA to change the existing seat belt regulations, and also to [write](#) your state and local representatives reminding them that laws in 49 states require you to wear a seat belt, but the federal regulation governing the manufacture of seat belts only requires automakers to belt people up to 215 lbs.

I urge you to make passengers in your vehicle safer by being sure they buckle up. You are four times more likely to die in a crash if you are not wearing your seat belt, and in a crash, any unbelted person is a hazard to all passengers.

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