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April 18, 2007

Mr. Stephen Kratzke
Associate Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)
400 Seventh Street, SW
Washington, DC 20590

Re: Consumers Union support of petition regarding safety belt lockability requirements

Consumers Union (CU) is writing in support of the petition submitted January 22, 2007 by SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. and Safe Ride News Publications regarding safety belt lockability requirements for vehicles. Specifically, the petition pertains to the sunset clause for the manual lockability feature of safety belts in section S7.1.1.5(d) of FMVSS 208.

Last year CU tested 85 vehicles and installed child seats in each of them. Aside from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), we are one of few independent testing organizations that tests and rates new vehicles each year. From our experience, several situations call for use of the manual lockability feature on vehicle safety belts. Without this, we would be taking several large steps back, instead of moving forward with the continuing goal of making children safe in motor vehicles in a manner easy for consumers to use.

Our engineers and Child Passenger Safety Technicians have spent a lot of time in vehicles and know that the lockability feature works well in numerous safety situations: These include: 1) when LATCH doesn't work well for a particular child restraint and the vehicle belts must be used to secure a child restraint, 2) when the consumer prefers to use a vehicle belt for securing a child restraint, 3) when LATCH is in the center position, or third row and parents want the option of putting their child in these positions yet using the safety belt. The increase of LATCH should not result in a decrease in manual locking features.

CU believes that lockability technology works well and that consumers today find it familiar and easy to use. The child passenger safety community has taught thousands of parents and others how to secure a child's seat to achieve a proper, tight installation. Training manuals refer to switchable retractors, locking and cinching latch plates and parents have been taught to use them properly.

We feel the option of the manual lockability feature is needed for the following reasons:

1. 48-LB. WEIGHT LIMIT FOR LATCH: There is a 48-lb weight limit with LATCH and there is no weight limit with safety belts. Once a child reaches the weight limit, the consumer has no choice but to secure the child restraint seat with a safety belt. If the belt system doesn't have the manual lockability feature, the parents have no choice but to use a locking clip, which is much more difficult and has led to a higher mis-installation rate. Additionally, many parents are now choosing to restrain their children in front facing seats with a five-point harness longer. If the only belt choice is a belt which locks in emergency situations only, parents who choose to continue using a five-point harness will be forced to use locking clips to achieve a tight, secure and safe installation.

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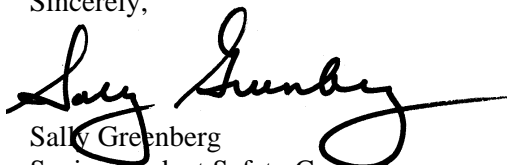
2. **CENTER SEATING POSITION:** As LATCH becomes available in more seating positions, i.e., center and third row, we don't want to see the manual lockability feature displaced from these positions. The center position is recommended as the safest seating position for children. This is where you will often find parents installing infant seats for their newborn children. Without the option of a manual locking feature, those parents who choose the center seating position will be forced to install seats with a locking clip. Our experience tells us that locking clips are difficult to use and increase the likelihood of unsafe installation. Because emergency locking retractors are unfamiliar to new parents, it is likely many infant seats in the center position will be installed with an emergency locking retractor (ELR) without a locking clip, resulting in an unsafely installed seat. Additionally, if an ELR becomes our only choice in the center seat, we will be removing the center seating position as an option for parents who don't feel comfortable with ELR installation. Thus we will be moving more children away from the center, to side seating positions.
3. **THREE-POINT BELT MANDATE:** NHTSA requires that all seat belts must be three-point belts, except in the center front location, which would make locking clip use even more difficult. Switchable retractors are the predominant locking mechanism for three point belts. For that reason it is familiar to parents. An emergency locking retractor would simply confuse parents.
4. **BOOSTER INSTALLATION:** The manual lockability feature is often used to restrain children in boosters to either keep them still, keep them in the correct and safest position and to keep them in position and safely restrained while sleeping. Without this option, they often slump forward or slide out of the belt to the side. Moving forward in the belt can introduce slack when the child subsequently moves back. Parents should be afforded the option to restrain their child with a tight fitting safety belt at all times. This added measure of security must remain for parents.
5. **CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS:** Manual lockability is often the only option available for securing a child with special needs in a booster. Without this feature, a child who could not hold his or her own body weight upright may slump forward. Removing this feature could also remove any viable seat belt options for a special needs child who can potentially fit in a booster. Equally important, many children with special physical or emotional challenges who must ride in safety restraint systems exceed the 48-lb. weight limit for most LATCH bars.

Conclusion:

Based on our experience testing and rating many vehicles and child restraint seats, we feel that consumers are more likely to get a secure fit for their child restraints with the manual lockability feature than with an emergency locking retractor and a locking clip. Removing this option can only lead to installations that are not as secure and not as safe. This is the time when we should all be looking towards enhancing safety rather than removing a much needed safety component. We urge NHTSA to remove the sunset clause in FMVSS 208 that allows manufacturers to cease providing the manual lockability feature of safety belts in vehicles.

Thank you consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,


Sally Greenberg
Senior Product Safety Counsel
Washington Office