
CENTER FOR AUTO SAFETY

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Center for Auto Safety – What It Is & What It Does Annual Report 2011

Background

The Center for Auto Safety (CAS) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and advocacy organization founded by Consumers Union and Ralph Nader in 1970 to provide consumers with a voice for auto safety and quality and to provide information to consumers on how to purchase the best motor vehicle to meet their needs. Although CAS has a staff of less than a dozen people, its work is supported by approximately 15,000 members across the United States, and it is nationally recognized as a leader in the areas of automobile safety and consumer protection.

Mission

The Center works on all aspects of automobile ownership and use ranging from pure economic issues such as anti-competitive overcharges in new vehicle prices, packed options, excessive tags, title and license fees to issues in safety defects, fuel efficiency, safety standards, secret warranties. Our mission is to improve the safety, efficiency, reliability and cost to the consumer of a vehicle. Beyond the consumer, our mission is to reduce motor vehicle deaths, injuries and crashes and the automobile's impact on the environment.

Finances

During our latest audited fiscal year, July 1, 2010, through June 30, 2011, our total expenses were \$698,924 of which \$624,768 or 89% were for program expenses. A copy of our audited financial statement for FY 2010-11 is available at:

http://www.autosafety.org/sites/default/files/imce_staff_uploads/CAUTO1.11.pdf

Benefits to Consumers

Since our founding 41 years ago as a voice for consumers to take on the giant auto companies, first in Washington and then across the country, the Center has made many strides for consumers. Among our many accomplishments are:

- ✓ Airbags in every vehicle
- ✓ Lemon laws in every state
- ✓ Free repairs in safety recall law
- ✓ Passage of fuel economy standards
- ✓ Landmark lawsuit upholding Clean Air Act recalls
- ✓ Saved tire tread wear grading standards
- ✓ Exposed secret warranties saving consumers billions
- ✓ Kept price of lead-free gasoline down to 1 cent more than leaded for first three years

- ✓ Legal victories mandating bridge inspections and construction zone safety rules
- ✓ Recall of Ford Pinto, Firestone tires and Toyota's for sudden acceleration
- ✓ Child seat registration system
- ✓ Lawsuit requiring direct tire pressure monitors in cars
- ✓ Law requiring tough new school bus safety standards
- ✓ Laws against texting and talking on cell phones while driving in over 30 states

Vehicle Safety

Vehicle safety is the Center Auto Safety's most important and largest project. CAS Vehicle Safety Staff petition the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) for stronger standards and investigations into dangerous defects. Other Vehicle Safety activities include testifying before Congress and Federal agencies, suing the government when it refuses to enforce federal laws and regulations on auto safety, and publicizing vital safety information through news releases, books and other means.

During 2010-11, much of the Center's activities focused on three key vehicle safety issues: distracted driving caused due to the use of interactive electronic devices in motor vehicles (<http://www.autosafety.org/foia-reveals-cell-phone-studies>), increasing roof strength through dynamic testing (<http://www.autosafety.org/campaigns/201>) and Toyota sudden unintended acceleration (<http://www.autosafety.org/toyota-sudden-acceleration>).

CAS used a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit to uncover a major Department of Transportation (DOT) study on the dangers of cell phone use while driving which was as great as drinking and driving. Shortly after the New York Times published the Center's lawsuit on its front page in August 2009, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced a distracted driving conference to develop counter measures against cell phone use. In November 2009, CAS testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee. As a result, many more states have begun to pass laws against both texting and talking while driving. DOT has begun to fund projects on cell phone use just like it funds projects on seat belt use and drunk driving.

CAS obtained funding from the Santos Family Foundation to test 15 vehicles for roof crush using the Jordan Rollover Rating System (JRS). The results from these test convinced NHTSA it had to issue a two sided roof crush standard with a strength to weight ratio of 3 to 1 versus the old one sided test with a strength to weight ratio of 1.5 to 1. NHTSA also committed to doing research on dynamic testing in order to set a dynamic standard in the future to present the present front and side dynamic impact standards. As a result of the new roof crush standard and an electronic stability control standard to reduce rollover crashes, CAS expects rollover deaths will drop from their present level of over 10,000 deaths each year to less than 5,000.

Since the mid-1980's, CAS has worked to reduce the incidence of sudden unintended acceleration (SUA) in vehicles. CAS was among the first to discover that when Toyota went to electronic throttle controls (drive-by-wire) phased in beginning with 2003 models, complaints of unintended acceleration in Toyota and Lexus vehicle with electronic throttle controls quadrupled.

CAS kept pressure on NHTSA and Toyota and got 10 million vehicles recalled for sticking gas pedals and jamming floor mats. We still seek a recall for electronic defects causing SUA. As a result of its work on this issue, CAS testified four times before Congress on Toyota defects and the need to reform vehicle safety laws.

CAS continues to find NHTSA withholding information every year on many vital safety issues ranging from airbag safety to vehicle defects. Often this withholding was due to auto makers claiming the information was confidential. CAS has filed numerous Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests this past year to protect the public's right to know about safety information on their vehicles. One major FOIA project forced NHTSA to release information on roof crush information that should be placed in the public docket and ensured a strong rule was issued. Another major FOIA forced NHTSA to release information on its research into the death toll caused by cell phone use which is just as deadly as drinking and driving. Present FOIA projects are aimed at forcing NHTSA to release its records on vehicle defects obtained under the Early Warning Reporting (EWR) System required to be set up under the TREAD Act after the Ford-Firestone crisis in 2000. In December 2011, CAS reached a tentative settlement of a FOIA lawsuit against the Treasury Department that will result in the release of 155,000 pages of emails between Treasury's Auto Task Force and GM/Chrysler regarding the GM and Chrysler bankruptcies. See: [Voluntary Stipulation of Partial Settlement and Proposed Order for Further Proceedings](#).

An example of CAS' relentless pressure to obtain information to get safety recalls is that we forced Honda to expand a small recall of less than 4,000 Honda Civics in 2008 for airbag inflator modules that sent shrapnel into drivers to four more recalls of over two million Hondas' and Acura's in 2009 through 2011. See: <http://www.autosafety.org/honda-adds-273000-vehicles-long-running-air-bag-recall> and <http://www.autosafety.org/cas-letter-nhtsa-re-honda-airbag-inflator-recalls>.

Safe Climate Campaign

During the past year, the Safe Climate Campaign, a project of the Center for Auto Safety, played a leading role in the successful effort to win stronger fuel efficiency and emissions standards from the Obama administration. The proposed 5% annual emissions cuts beginning in MY2017 will yield a standard of 54.5 mpg by 2025. This is a major victory in the campaign to curb the United States' contribution to global warming that will pay increasing dividends in years to come. The new standards will save 1.5 million barrels of oil a day, and keep 280 million metric tons of carbon out of the atmosphere in 2030. The Safe Climate Campaign used administrative advocacy as well as op-ed columns, press interviews and statements to draw attention to the economic and environmental benefits of clean cars, and to hold the auto industry accountable. Its op-eds appeared in at least 40 newspapers and Web sites, including The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Huffington Post.

Publications & Communications

Whether it's authoring books, preparing consumer information packages or appearing on national news, getting vehicle safety and reliability information out to the public is one of the Center's most important missions. During 2010, CAS staff appeared on more television

programs than any other auto safety group in American. We continue to publish the award winning Car Book ever year. The Car Book has detailed ratings and information on every 2011 model to help consumers buy safe and reliable cars. The West Group, the leading legal publisher in the country, relies on CAS to write the leading treatise on government regulation of the auto industry.

In 2011, CAS continued to expand and update its Website which provides streaming media videos so that the public could get see the projects on which CAS was working. At the same time, the Website was expanded to provide detailed information on and easy to use links to individual state lemon laws plus a lemon lawyer locator as well as an expert locator. CAS created a vehicle dossier on our website that provides in-depth make and model information <http://www.autosafety.org> so consumers can find out everything from videos of crash tests to recalls to technical service bulletins on cars they own or purchase. We took NHTSA data bases and made them far more user friendly and incorporated them in our vehicle dossier. In recognition of the value of our Website to consumers, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has created a link from their Website to ours to enable more consumers to take advantage of the information that CAS can provide.

Lemonaide

CAS evaluates every state's lemon law and provides every state attorney general with the results. CAS made specific recommendations on how individual states could strengthen their lemon laws. A number of states responded positively to CAS' recommendations and asked for CAS input on implementing and revising their laws which CAS did during the year. CAS addressed the National Association of Lemon Law Administrators (the group of state officials responsible for state lemon law enforcement) to build on this effort to improve state lemon laws and administration and continues to provide information and advice to them.

CAS continues to pressure auto makers to take responsibility for economic defects that the NHTSA does not consider to be safety defects. For example, CAS was successful in getting Ford to take action on a wide range of defects in the 2000-02 Ford Focus. All told the Focus had 11 safety recalls and 4 service campaigns. See www.autosafety.org/article.php?scid=&did=309.

CAS has investigated engine oil sludge in a wide range of vehicles including the infamous 1997-2004 Chrysler vehicles with 2.7L 4-cylinder engines with the objective to get every manufacturer to at least match Toyota who agreed to extend the warranty on engine oil sludge failures to 8 years, unlimited miles on its 3.0L V6 and 2.2L 4-cylinder engines. Since then, CAS was successful in getting Saab and VW to match Toyota with a 8 year, unlimited mileage warranty for oil sludge.

CAS launched a campaign to get the cost of replacement smart keys reduced by petitioning the Federal Trade Commission to investigate costs of up to \$300 for individual keys and \$3,000 when a new computer/key system was required. Such smart keys often wear out due to computer chip failure. Traditional mechanical keys cost less than \$10 to replace, See: <http://autosafety.org/article.php?scid=37&did=1217>.

Membership

CAS' strength as an advocacy organization has always come from its members and individual consumers. Our very first Lemon Book in 1970 was based on 4,000 complaints to Ralph Nader about their "bad cars." Since then we have received over 500,000 complaints from consumers on vehicle problems. Today, CAS has about 20,000 members who firmly support our mission of holding the government and industry responsible for safe, reliable and efficient motor vehicles.

Membership in CAS is a form of "lemon insurance." Stephen Licata of Pasadena used his CAS lemon insurance when he got a bad paint job on a Ford Taurus. He took Ford to small claims court and got \$2,000 plus court costs. He wrote CAS: "Thank you for standing up for the average consumer. Your organization and the small claims court process really impressed my wife, an immigrant from Peru and one of America's newest citizens." Many consumers who are not members also benefit from CAS' campaigns. Shawn Hines of Michigan wrote about his 2000 Dodge Intrepid: "My engine failed and I spoke to a member of ISG and my problems were solved. I was given enough to get a new engine and then some. They were very nice to me and resolved my problem within 3 days. Thank you Center for Auto Safety."

Board of Directors

The Center's Board is comprised of members who have expertise in the fields of auto safety, legal affairs, technology and public health. Board Members actively participate in the conduct of program and fiscal affairs at the Center for Auto Safety by attending 3 board meetings per year, reviewing and approving the annual budget and regular financial reports and receiving regular information updates on Center activities. The Board consists of the following members.

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