

SAFETY STORYTELLING: 5 TIPS FOR ENGAGING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS



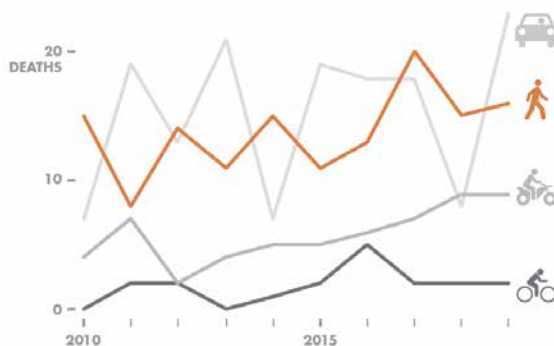
Elected officials play an important role in the success of safety programs. They have great influence on safety priorities and resources dedicated to safety efforts. They influence partner agencies and organizations. Supportive elected officials can serve as safety ambassadors that move the Toward Zero Deaths vision forward.

The following tips are taken from the [Engaging with Elected Officials](#) training video on the TZD website. The training video comes from the Road Map to Implementation series of webinars, materials, and guidance documents to help states, tribes, and local agencies implement the TZD National Strategy in their communities.

1. Use Data to Demonstrate Challenges and Opportunities

Well-presented data will help elected officials see the big picture of your community's traffic safety needs. Data can educate officials about the multiple factors that influence crashes, and the variety of approaches needed to address traffic safety issues. Data can put traffic safety problems into context and point the way to effective decision-making and prioritization of resources.

- Whether you show fatality numbers, crashes by mode, or data on contributing factors, make sure you give context to the numbers you show. Point out trends and changes in the data. Don't just read a data table to your officials; explain what the data means and why it's important.
- Elected officials often have many issues to discuss within a limited timeframe. Focus the data you present on the issue you're trying to solve. Don't omit critical or potentially negative information, but don't weigh down your story with irrelevant information. Make priorities clear.
- Simplify your charts and graphs to make your message clear. For example, the Portland Vision Zero program used this simplified chart to show the city council a concerning trend of increasing pedestrian fatalities.



Portland Vision Zero Program

2. Strengthen your Presentation with Human Connections

Bring your presentation to life by involving real people. Counterbalance the data in your presentation by adding human interest with a compelling true story or a co-presenter who shares their point of view as a citizen, community member, safety stakeholder, etc.

- Do your homework on issues that your elected officials have been hearing about. Find and share a connection between the safety issue you're presenting and other issues your community is facing.
- Demonstrate support for safety by co-presenting with other agencies, law enforcement, public health, the business community, etc.
- Tell the elected officials how you're communicating about the safety issue with the community, engaging citizens, and considering equity in the solution.



3. Set the Stage for a Long-Term Relationship

The TZD vision of zero traffic-related deaths and serious injuries is a big goal and requires long-term commitment. Your meeting with elected officials will make an impression and could set the stage for future “asks.” It would not be possible to educate officials on all of your agency’s traffic safety needs and all possible solutions in one meeting. However, you could strategically include messages that educate and prepare officials for future conversations about traffic safety.

- If you're requesting funding for short-term, high-impact investments, mention how those investments will complement bigger projects to be done when resources are available.
- Educate the officials on terms like “practical solutions” or “optimal safety design.” Help them understand that efficiency and effectiveness are part of your process for selecting priorities.
- Provide talking points about the issues and proposed strategies that they can share with their constituents. Give them “three things to remember,” or share the link to a public-friendly website or social media page.



4. Point out the Cost of Doing Nothing

During the project development process, transportation engineers analyze a “No Action” alternative. They seek to answer the question: What will happen if we do nothing? “No Action” almost never means “no impact,” nor does it mean “no cost.”

- Bookend the data in your presentation with the results of modeling, projections, etc. Show the elected officials what they’re choosing by default if they choose not to pursue a given solution.
- Use the Federal Highway Administration “[Crash Costs for Highway Safety Analysis](#)” publication to show the societal and economic costs of crashes that result in fatalities or injuries. Using 2016 traffic fatality and injury numbers, Washington Department of Transportation calculated that the cost of their state’s fatalities and serious injuries were equivalent to a gas tax of \$2.46.
- Show needed safety investments relative to the value of your agency’s transportation system. Washington Department of Transportation calculated the total value of its infrastructure at \$200 billion. They pointed out to officials that a \$200 billion asset is also a \$200 billion liability and were able to secure a significant investment in safety.

5. Solidify your Relationship by Reporting Back

Demonstrate your agency’s accountability by reporting back to elected officials on progress. Setting up an ongoing pattern of meaningful communication will help safety messages stick with officials and will increase their sense of ownership in traffic safety.

- Use data to show progress against a baseline. Show officials how you use data to refine strategies.
- Measure and share successes with elected officials, with news media, and the public. Show officials how their investment resulted in a safer transportation system.
- Be honest about challenges. Communicating about difficult issues is a great opportunity to reinforce the multi-faceted approach that most safety challenges require.

