

A Safe System Guide for Transportation: Sharing this Approach to Lead Your Community to Action

INTRODUCTION

The recent momentum in awareness of the Safe System approach brought by various federal, state, and local initiatives across the United States presents an opportunity for productive conversations about how to foster a Safe System within and across communities.

The Safe System vision is a transportation system that is designed to protect people from traffic injury, so that everyone can go about their daily activities and access opportunities such as school and jobs without fear that they or a loved one will be harmed in traffic. A Safe System shares responsibility for road safety by building safety into the system rather than placing blame on road users when injuries occur.

While ongoing initiatives are providing a range of technical assistance for identifying problems, and planning, designing, and implementing Safe System improvements, the question of public acceptance of these new road features has not been systematically addressed. Providing road users with advanced and local information to increase awareness can go a long way toward garnering acceptance and preventing push-back from people who may feel that they are being inconvenienced by new road features without clear benefits.

The purpose of this guide is to assist local decision makers, transportation professionals, and community advocates in effectively communicating with the public about why the Safe System policies and engineering approaches are necessary, how they work, and how they benefit everyone who uses the roads. The focus of the guide is on roadway improvements rather than vehicle or individual behavior changes because roadway changes are often the first aspect of the Safe System that community members encounter.

METHODOLOGY

The research team examined the vast literature on nudging, communication campaigns, marketing, and message framing and how they shape public understanding of policies designed to address complex social issues (e.g., childhood obesity, climate change, food waste). From this review, the team drew insights about why and under what conditions various policies secure public support. The research team designed focus group questions using message framing elements from the literature on social policy acceptance, and conducted

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ABOUT THE AAA FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

Founded in 1947, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit, publicly supported charitable research and educational organization dedicated to saving lives by preventing traffic crashes and reducing injuries when crashes occur. Funding for this research was provided by voluntary contributions from AAA/CAA and their affiliated motor clubs, individual members, AAA-affiliated insurance companies, and other organizations or sources.

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a series of focus groups with safety professionals to recommend messaging that would improve the likelihood of support for Safe System implementation.

This study involved nine focus groups. The first four group discussions, which were among AAA Clubs and AAA Inc. representatives, gathered messaging content to address the barriers and needs of Safe System implementation mentioned by participants. The intent of the next five groups, which consisted of community transportation safety professionals from across the nation representing public safety, public health, safety advocacy, road authorities, and academia, was to test and refine framing guidance by capturing responses to messages informed by the identified problems and needs.

The project team used a codebook thematic analysis approach to gain insight into effective Safe System messaging from these panel meetings. Through the focus group discussions, the team discerned key themes and identified ways in which communications guidance could help communities better understand how Safe System interventions work, and how these approaches could improve local transportation safety.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceived barriers to Safe System implementation include the following:

1. Limited knowledge about what a Safe System is and how to push for change
2. Skepticism about the staying power of the Safe System approach and whether it truly represents a new paradigm
3. Professionals not seeing the value of working across disciplines, instead preferring to focus on their circumscribed area of expertise
4. Lack of social and political priority for investing in safety
5. Insufficient resources, such as skills and money, to marshal Safe System implementation

The needs identified to address these barriers include the following:

1. Providing brief, accessible explanations of the road injury crisis and how Safe System interventions and policies work and benefit communities
2. Developing messaging that concentrates less on individual road user responsibility and more on how Safe System interventions and policies can protect road users from serious injury

3. Equipping Safe System champions with practical, turnkey guidance on how to discuss Safe System interventions and policies
4. Identifying elements for framing Safe System interventions in ways that resonate with diverse audiences

Based on these key findings, the research team developed a framing guide—*the Values–Solutions–Action Framework* for safety messaging—which offers recommendations and tips on how to frame Safe System interventions to facilitate public acceptance and support. Leveraging the thematic analysis, the project team identified five themes from the focus groups on messaging to inform effective communication about Safe System strategies:

1. Resonating values depend on personal experience and community needs
2. Importance of showing the impact of the problems and the solutions
3. Need for a shift from blame to positive behavior language
4. Create a partnership between the value of individualism and shared responsibility
5. Need to focus on what is practical to implement

IMPLICATIONS

The transportation safety sector needs strategies for shifting the focus of messaging away from blaming individual road users and toward influencing policymakers with the authority to implement interventions that will protect road users from serious injury. This could involve describing how poorly designed roads often encourage risky behavior, and illustrating how the Safe System approach can encourage safe driving and improve the safety of all road users.

Messaging to build support for a Safe System may need to be more variable across communities than conventional safety messages to account for differences in community goals that relate to pro-social values, including addressing racial or income-based inequities. Adding to this is the need to meet people where they are, and the urgency behind this messaging challenge—the window for building support is limited. The current momentum behind Safe System is not likely to continue if public pushback delays or prevents widespread adoption.