

# THE TRAFFIC SAFETY NAVIGATOR

WINTER 2026

*The Traffic Safety Navigator is the 2025–2029 California Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP) e-newsletter. The newsletter provides SHSP updates along with insights into best practices for implementing strategies that achieve zero traffic fatalities and serious injuries on California's roadways.*

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# IMPLEMENTING THE 2025–2029 SHSP

Welcome to the winter edition of the Traffic Safety Navigator. An important milestone has been reached in the development of the next California Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP). In fall 2025, the SHSP Executive Leadership Committee approved the 2025–2029 SHSP, which now awaits final approval and signature from the Governor's office. A paradigm shift in road safety is occurring, and the 2025–2029 California SHSP stands at the forefront of this transformation. This SHSP signifies a commitment to institutionalizing the Safe System Approach (SSA), which provides an integrated approach to addressing road safety by identifying and examining the interconnected elements to achieve the goal of zero traffic fatalities and serious injuries.

To implement the next SHSP, we will continue our work with traditional road safety partners but also continue to seek new stakeholders, partnerships, collaborations, and commitments to help break down silos and promote a more holistic approach to roadway safety. A critical part of this work will be a focus on creating a pro-social traffic safety culture as highlighted below, in addition to strengthening existing relationships with stakeholders from tribal, academic, local, regional, and statewide organizations.

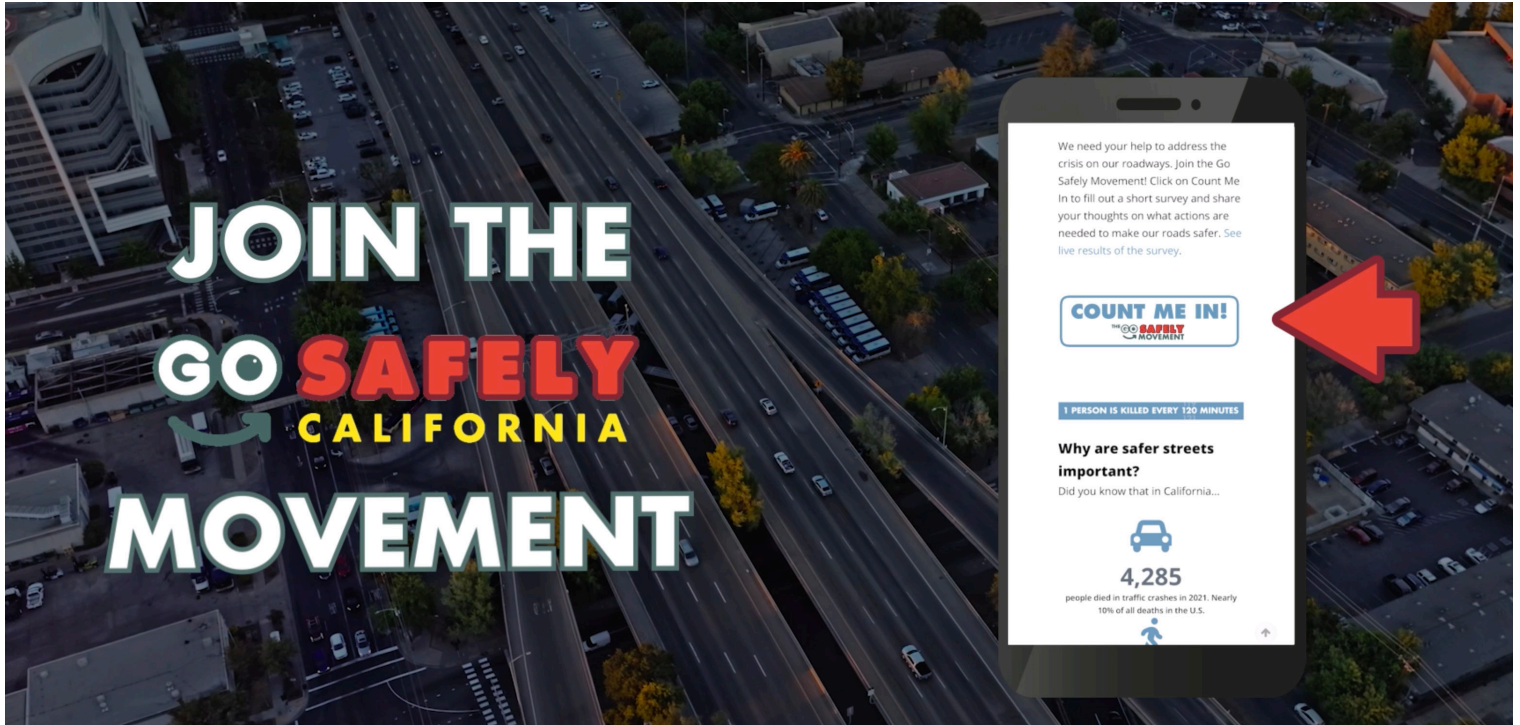
## CREATING A PRO-SOCIAL TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE

Pro-social traffic safety culture is an emerging concept aimed at reshaping road users' behavior to prioritize not only their own safety but also the safety of others. This culture is built on the foundational idea that members of various social groups, such as families, friends, neighbors, and workplaces, can take proactive steps to create a safer road environment for the people in their social groups by influencing and supporting each other to use the roadway more safely. Social norms, which are the accepted behaviors within these groups, play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing positive road safety habits. While these groups do not have direct responsibility for traffic safety, their influence can be significant in promoting safety practices amongst their peers.

Achieving a pro-social traffic safety culture relies on creating a social environment that encourages everyone to become a champion for traffic safety and an ally of traditional agencies that are responsible for traffic safety. This involves motivating and educating others, promoting responsible behavior, and fostering a communal sense of shared responsibility towards road safety. Attending agency meetings, town halls or working with groups that liaise with road safety agencies, such as SHSP [Challenge Area Teams](#), are all ways that this can be achieved.

In 2022, the California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) introduced the [Go Safely](#) game plan program, which underscores the vital role of social

norming in promoting responsible behavior among soccer fans. The program raised awareness about the importance of not driving under the influence through engaging messages displayed at Heart Health Park in Sacramento. OTS and Caltrans distributed yellow cards with information about the Go Safely game plan and the Designated Driver Program. They created an interactive and educational experience encouraging fans to follow the game plan by designating a sober driver, arranging a safe ride home, and ensuring friends don't drive impaired.



Other examples of creating a pro-social traffic safety culture include initiatives that promote the idea that everyone can play a role in enhancing road safety by adopting and encouraging safer behaviors. Campaigns such as the award-winning [Embrace Life - always wear your seatbelt](#) video leverage the bonds and roles shared by family members, and showcase how familial relationships can be harnessed to encourage seatbelt use. Additionally, organizations like [Impact Teen Drivers](#) advocate for pro-social traffic safety culture through programs like [Be the Change](#), which engages, educates, and empowers teens and their influencers to save lives by encouraging making good decisions behind the wheel.

Pro-social traffic safety culture is a significant component of the broader traffic safety culture framework. While traffic safety culture encompasses the collective beliefs and values regarding road safety, pro-social traffic safety culture specifically focuses on fostering positive behaviors that enhance the safety of all road users. By leveraging the influence of social groups and promoting communal responsibility, this approach aims to create a safer road environment for everyone.

# INSIDE LOOK: PROMOTING A PRO-SOCIAL TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE

Pro-social traffic safety culture is a centerpiece of the 2025–2029 SHSP and is critical to institutionalizing the Safe System Approach (SSA). The SHSP Team sat down with **Rachel Carpenter**, Chief Safety Officer of the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), who is currently on a special assignment, as well as **Stephanie Dougherty**, Director of the California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS), to find out more about what promoting a pro-social traffic safety culture looks like within their organizations.

## What does pro-social traffic safety culture mean to you and your organization?

### **Stephanie Dougherty (OTS):**

OTS views pro-social traffic safety culture as a people-centered approach that is rooted in a sense of shared responsibility and embeds safety in our beliefs, norms, and everyday actions. The OTS vision is that all people will be safe on California roads. Our work is aligned around the Safe System Approach and taking a holistic, multi-layered approach to safety. A pro-social safety culture furthers a systemic approach by emphasizing that safety should guide all decisions at every level — from public policy to communities, organizations, families, friends, and individuals. By fostering values and norms that prioritize looking out for others, the OTS aims to create a culture where safety is everyone's first priority, and we all feel connected to the broader goal of saving lives.

### **Rachel Carpenter (Caltrans):**

Pro-social traffic safety culture is a shared set of values, beliefs, and behaviors in which people act with regard for the safety and well-being of others. It is grounded in mutual responsibility and systems thinking, recognizing that serious injuries and deaths are shaped not only by individual actions but by decisions made across the transportation system. This includes upstream factors, such as policy, funding, institutional practices and built environment, that influence exposure, risk and crash severity long before a trip begins. A pro-social safety culture extends the crash narrative back in time beyond the snapshot captured in the crash report. By looking earlier in the timeline, we can better understand how prior choices shaped the conditions that influence whether a crash was likely to occur in the first place. For Caltrans, a pro-social safety culture means embedding this mindset into every layer of how we plan, design, operate and maintain the transportation system. It requires strengthening our focus on collective care, alongside individual responsibility, by recognizing that safety outcomes are shaped by system-level decisions made across disciplines and agencies. This approach treats traffic safety as a population-level public health issue and supports our vision of a California

where every person can reach their destination free from fatal or serious harm. Achieving that vision requires breaking down silos and coordinating beyond traditional traffic safety partners, engaging the broader set of systems and sectors that shape risk upstream and influence safety outcomes.

### **Can you highlight how this differs from traditional approaches to education and traffic safety?**

#### **Stephanie Dougherty (OTS):**

We recognize there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach to promoting a safety culture. OTS’s approach recognizes the need for tailored, community-specific strategies and focuses on positive engagement. While we call attention to the seriousness of the public health crisis on California roads and the impact to our communities, we also balance that with positive messaging that highlights the actions individuals and organizations can take to make a difference. We connect statistics to real stories, encourage shared responsibility, and promote positive social norms through empowerment and calls to action. For example, this year’s August launch of our anti-speeding campaign coincided with the start of the school year. Part of our messaging tapped into a shared value in communities across California — that we all want students, teachers, and other community members to get to and from school safely. The kick-off of this campaign also featured examples of proactive safety actions that are being led by state, local, and community organizations and are collectively advancing the Safe System elements of safer speeds, safer roads and safer people.

#### **Rachel Carpenter (Caltrans):**

Traditionally, there has been a focus on changing individual behavior through education or enforcement — with messages like “drive safely” and “slow down.” While these messages matter, they largely assume people will behave perfectly and not make mistakes. A pro-social traffic safety culture takes a different approach. It recognizes that people are human and that mistakes are inevitable so the responsibility for safety cannot rest on individuals alone. Instead, safety is framed as a shared social responsibility and a population-level public health issue. This shift places greater emphasis on proactive, system-level strategies (managing exposure, likelihood and severity of crashes) rather than relying primarily on behavior or compliance. By focusing on upstream factors that shape risk in the first place, we can design a more forgiving transportation system that prevents mistakes from becoming tragedies and better protects everyone who uses our roads.



## What sort of institutional, organizational, or policy changes have you made to promote pro-social traffic safety culture within your agency?

### **Stephanie Dougherty (OTS):**

Safety is at the core of what we do as an organization, and nurturing a proactive traffic safety culture is deeply embedded in OTS's planning, policies, and daily operations. We have institutionalized this culture through our core planning documents, such as our 2024–2026 Triennial Highway Safety Plan which affirmed our commitment to the Safe System Approach and promoting a safety culture where zero is the only acceptable number. This focus is carried through our Strategic Plan, statewide grant program, and campaigns like Go Safely that we share in collaboration with Caltrans. The Joint Secretary's Policy on Road Safety released earlier this year by the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA) and California Health and Human Services Agency (CalHHS) — which calls for a public health, prevention-first, investment mindset that targets the root causes of traffic crashes — provides an additional foundational document to guide our work. We look forward to continued collaboration with our partners to advance these foundational principles and implement joint strategies to enhance safety for all road users.

### **Rachel Carpenter (Caltrans):**

Caltrans has made significant institutional changes to embed pro-social safety principles across the Department. We now operate under a shared policy framework that elevates safety as our top priority, anchored by our Director's Policy 36 on Road Safety and reinforced by the Joint Secretary's Policy on Road Safety. Together, these reframe safety as a public health responsibility and require transportation decisions to integrate the Safe System Approach and prevention-based principles. Organizationally, the Department created the Chief Safety Officer position and designated Safe System Leads in all 12 Caltrans Districts to champion this culture locally. Every District now has a Road Safety Action Plan, and our major planning documents, such as the Strategic Management Plan (SMP) and the State Highway System Management Plan (SHSMP) align with SSA implementation. We have embedded these principles into everyday practice, for example, through Design Information Bulletin 94 which updates design guidance to better reflect land use context. Importantly, we are increasingly viewing broader statewide reforms beyond Caltrans alone — including the shift from Level of Service (LOS) to Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and housing streamlining policies — as upstream safety countermeasures because they reduce exposure by reducing vehicle trips, lower crash likelihood and limit injury severity. These changes reinforce safety as a shared, system-level responsibility.

## What types of projects, programs, and/or campaigns have you helped initiate or develop to promote pro-social traffic safety culture more broadly outside of your organization?

### **Stephanie Dougherty (OTS):**

OTS has launched and supported a variety of initiatives and partnerships to empower communities, foster collaboration, and spread the message of shared responsibility for traffic safety across California. In partnership with Caltrans, "[Go Safely, California](#)" is a statewide education and encouragement umbrella campaign that emphasizes safe behaviors and looking out for others traveling on our roads. Since its launch several years ago, hundreds of Californians have responded to the call to be a Traffic Safety Champion. This program highlights ways for individuals to be proactively involved in community-led change, whether as a social media influencer, community volunteer, community advocate, or community organizer. Through our traffic safety programs, including our statewide grant program, the OTS continues to expand partnerships to support collaborative safety initiatives and build a strong safety culture in communities around the state.

### **Rachel Carpenter (Caltrans):**

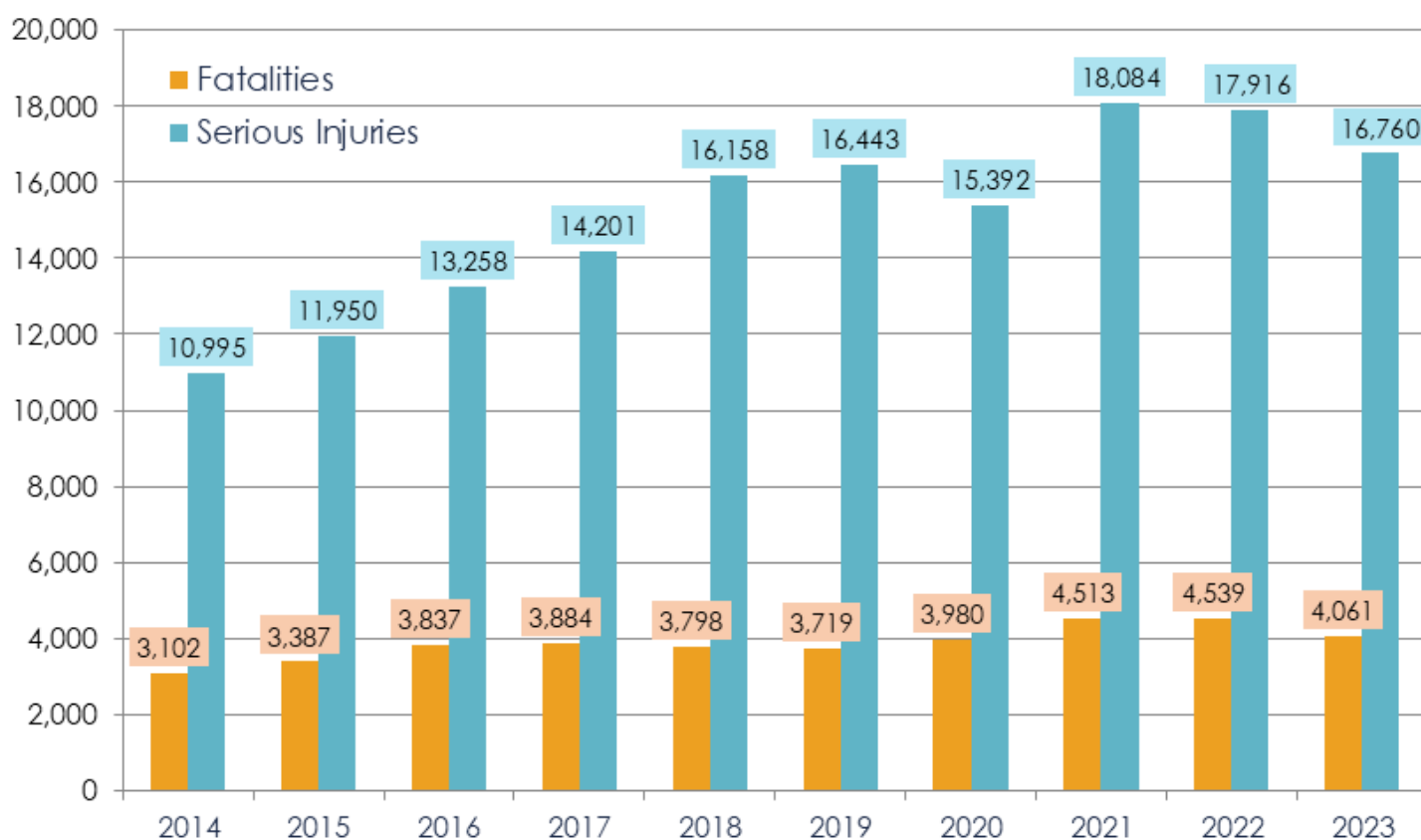
Caltrans continues to work closely with our partners through the SHSP to strengthen interagency collaboration and intentionally expand partnerships beyond the traditional E's of engineering, education, enforcement, and emergency response. This has included engaging public health, land use, and equity partners who are critical to shaping upstream risk factors and preventing harm before it occurs. We ground this work in a shared understanding that fatal and serious injuries result from kinetic energy exceeding human tolerance, which helps align partners around prevention rather than blame. In that context, the Department helped advance the conversation on speed management by sharing evidence on the safety effectiveness of speed safety cameras, which may have contributed to multiple legislative actions now allowing their use in California. Most recently, we are advancing implementation of the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA)/California Health and Human Services Agency (CalHHS) Joint Secretary's Policy through the State Priority Safety Corridor initiative. This brings state, regional, and local partners together to create safer environments and strengthen a culture of care on California's roads. We are especially encouraged that one of the newly announced corridors is on the local road network, where approximately two-thirds of California's fatal and serious injuries occur, underscoring the importance of shared responsibility beyond the state highway system.

Both OTS and Caltrans have embraced the shift to pro-social traffic safety culture within their agencies. Their work can be looked to as examples of how organizations adopt the culture for the good of road safety in California. For more information, please visit the OTS and Caltrans websites at [ots.ca.gov](https://ots.ca.gov) and [dot.ca.gov](https://dot.ca.gov).

# NEW CRASH DATA SHOWS PROMISING RESULTS

As the SHSP shifts into the implementation phase, it is especially important that there is a detailed data-driven approach to the identification of the issues that are contributing to fatalities and serious injuries. Crash data for 2023 was finalized in late summer 2025, which provides an updated snapshot of road safety performance in California.

According to 2023 Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) data, which is prepared by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the number of fatalities in California decreased by over 10% between 2022 and 2023 — from 4,539 fatalities in 2022 to 4,061 fatalities in 2023. In other words, 478 fewer people died in a crash on California public roadways in 2023 compared to 2022. Similarly, serious injuries decreased by 6% between 2022 and 2023, per Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS) data.

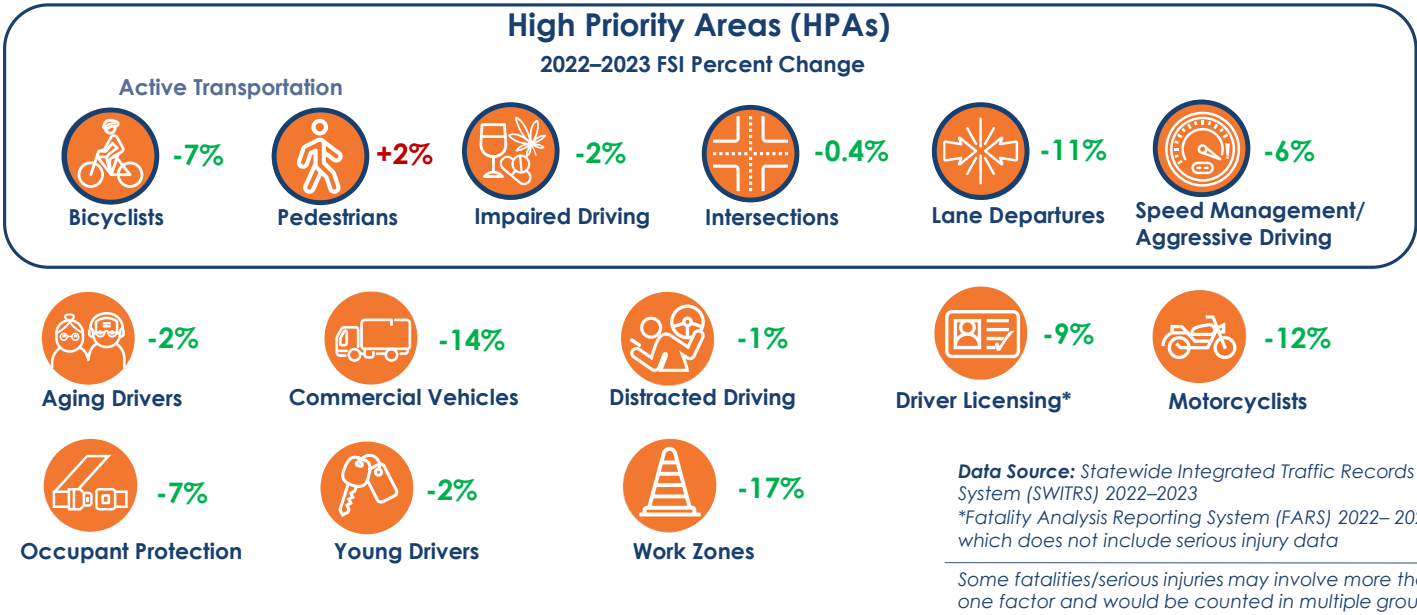


Source: FARS (2014–2023), SWITRS (2014–2023)



This annual decrease in fatalities and serious injuries (FSI) was more pronounced in certain Challenge Areas, highlighting the important nuances of road safety trends gleaned from crash data. Some Challenge Areas reported an FSI decrease of over 10% from 2022 to 2023, including Work Zones (-17%), Commercial Vehicles (-14%), Motorcyclists (-12%), and Lane Departures (-11%), per SWITRS data. On the other hand, Pedestrians FSI increased by over 2% between 2022 and 2023. It is important to recognize that fatal crash trends have natural variation year to year. Focusing on a single year of crash data, especially at the Challenge Area level, can lead to misinterpreting random variation as a genuine problem or as evidence of a safety improvement.

# Challenge Areas 2022–2023 FSI Percent Change



Data analysis is an ongoing process to inform the SHSP and it will continue. By closely analyzing longer-term data trends, the SHSP can more effectively allocate resources and refine strategies to advance the goal of zero fatalities and serious injuries on all of California's public roads. These data-driven insights are critical for guiding the SHSP's next steps, enabling targeted interventions and informed decision-making.

# NEW RESEARCH PROJECT STUDIES EFFECTS OF CANNABIS CONSUMPTION ON DRIVING

The California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and the California Highway Patrol (CHP) are the lead agencies conducting a one-of-a-kind [research project](#) on cannabis-impaired driving. [Senate Bill 94](#) (2017), combined medical and recreational cannabis laws and funding structures.

This project is especially timely given the recent legalization of recreational cannabis, which adds complexity to the policing of impaired driving. Unlike alcohol, the effects of cannabis on driving cannot be assessed solely by measuring its active compounds in the body. The study employs a rigorous experimental design with true random double-blind assignment and a control condition, ensuring that neither participants nor assessors know whether the driver consumed real cannabis. This methodology, considered the gold standard in behavioral research, minimizes biases and allows for strong conclusions about causality and statistical associations.

Remarkably, this research is considered to be the first to test behavioral methods for detecting cannabis impairment in real vehicles, supported by advanced instruments that enhance the precision of data measurements. Participants operate vehicles under strict parameters at the CHP Academy in West Sacramento on a closed course.

The study has received approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), California Department of Justice's Research Advisory Panel, and UC San Diego's Human Research Protections Program. It is conducted in partnership with the Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research at the University of California, San Diego. The SHSP Team is closely following this research project and will work with the involved agencies to share more information as it becomes available. For more information or to volunteer, visit [dmv.ca.gov/portal/dmv-research-reports/research-project-on-cannabis-impaired-driving-faqs](https://dmv.ca.gov/portal/dmv-research-reports/research-project-on-cannabis-impaired-driving-faqs).



# SAFETY SPOTLIGHT: CALIFORNIA TRIBAL REPRESENTATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

*By Misty Rickwalt, Karuk Tribe, Transportation Director*

Tribal groups across California play a vital role in promoting roadway safety and maintaining critical transportation routes that serve tribal and non-tribal communities alike. With a deep understanding of more rural conditions and oftentimes geographic isolation, the California tribes bring an essential perspective to statewide safety planning and decision-making.

Through participation in key roadway safety organizations such as the SHSP Steering Committee, the Caltrans Native American Advisory Committee (NAAC), and the North Coast Tribal Transportation Commission (NCTTC), tribal representatives ensure that California's diverse tribal voices are heard. Their involvement offers insights into challenges with roadway safety on rural state highways, particularly where roadway striping, guardrails, drainage, maintenance, and enhanced emergency response efforts are sorely needed.

Active engagement in the SHSP empowers tribal representatives across California to share local safety concerns, advocate for equitable solutions, and collaborate with state, local, and regional partners. This participation not only strengthens mutual understanding but also ensures that the unique needs of tribal communities are reflected in statewide safety strategies. Tribal representation on the SHSP Steering Committee and Executive Leadership helps expand opportunities for outreach and engagement with tribes throughout California and prioritize strategies for implementation on their roads. The SHSP's collaborative approach continues to unite agencies and communities across California in achieving the goal of zero fatalities and serious injuries.

# GET INVOLVED AND SHSP RESOURCES

**CHECK OUT THE SHSP CRASH DATA DASHBOARD — FINAL 2023 DATA AND PROVISIONAL 2024 DATA FROM SWITRS NOW AVAILABLE!**



The California SHSP Crash Data Dashboard was developed to provide SHSP implementers with direct access to crash data to support data-driven implementation of the SHSP. The dashboard currently uses finalized crash data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) and the Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS) and allows users to customize reports by location and other characteristics, including whether a fatal or serious injury crash was within five miles of a tribal boundary. The SHSP Team is excited to share that the Dashboard has now been updated with the latest SWITRS crash data available, including the finalized 2023 data, located in the 2014–2023 Dashboard, as well as Provisional 2024 data. Additional updates include a new option to filter data by an urban or rural area, improved design to the map page, and pedestrian and bicyclist telematics data from the SHSP partners at Replica. If you are unfamiliar with the Crash Data Dashboard, it only takes a few minutes to register and create an account; there is a user guide and videos available in both English and Spanish.

**View Dashboard**

## High Priority Areas



Bicyclists

(Active Transportation)



Pedestrians



Impaired Driving



Intersections



Lane Departures



Speed Management/  
Aggressive Driving

## Focus Areas



Aging Drivers



Commercial Vehicles



Distracted Driving



Driver Licensing



Emergency Response



Emerging Technologies



Motorcyclists



Occupant Protection



Work Zones



Young Drivers



**WE CAN'T DO IT WITHOUT YOU**

The SHSP is just the start. We all need to work together to implement the actions developed in the SHSP. Involvement in an SHSP Challenge Area Team is a direct way to influence countermeasures selected to improve safety. Volunteers are needed for all Challenge Areas. Join today!

**Get Involved**

**WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU**



Tell us about your successful implementation of traffic safety countermeasures! We will be highlighting success stories on the SHSP website and in future newsletters.

**Share Your Story**

# UPCOMING AND RECENT EVENTS

**January 11–15, 2026, Transportation Research Board (TRB) Annual Meeting,  
Walter E. Washington Convention Center, Washington D.C.**

TRB's Annual Meeting attracts thousands of transportation professionals from around the world. The program covers all transportation modes, with sessions and workshops addressing topics of interest to policy makers, administrators, practitioners, researchers, and representatives of government, industry, and academic institutions. With thousands of presentations in hundreds of workshops and sessions, and meetings organized by TRB standing committees, almost every transportation mode and topic is represented. Learn more on the [TRB website](#).

**February 24–27, 2026, County Engineers Association of California (CEAC) Spring Conference and League of California Cities (Cal Cities) Public Works Officers Institute, Hyatt Regency Monterey, Monterey, CA**

CEAC advances county engineering and management by providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and information aimed at improving service to the public. Cal Cities offers education and training programs designed to teach city officials about new developments in their field and exchange solutions to common challenges facing their cities. Comprised of county engineers, public works directors, county road commissioners, and professional personnel throughout California's 58 counties, this annual conference brings together County and City Public Works officials, other senior level staff, and private sector consultants to network, discuss challenges facing many California counties, and share valuable information from relevant experts. To register, visit the [registration page](#).



## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE TOPICS?

We want to know what topics are of interest to California! Complete our simple feedback form to provide suggestions on future newsletter topics.

**[Submit Feedback](#)**

To stay up-to-date on SHSP news, subscribe [HERE](#).

# WHAT IS THE SHSP?

The California **Strategic Highway Safety Plan (SHSP)** is a comprehensive, statewide road safety plan which provides a collaborative framework for eliminating fatalities and serious injuries across all travel modes and on all public roads. The SHSP utilizes a data-driven process to identify key safety needs and guides resource and investment decisions that provide the greatest potential to achieve the plan's goal of zero traffic fatalities and serious injuries on all of California's public roadways. Started in 2005, the SHSP is updated regularly to ensure continued progress and to meet changing safety needs. Currently, over 1,390 safety stakeholders from over 530 public and private agencies and organizations work together on this effort under the guidance of the SHSP Executive Leadership and Steering Committees. The California SHSP is aligning its activities and actions with the Safe System Approach, which identifies six interconnected elements to achieve the goal of zero fatalities and serious injuries:

- **Safe Roads**
- **Safe Vehicles**
- **Safe Speeds**
- **Post-Crash Care**
- **Safe Road Users**
- **Safer Land Use**



## VISION

Safe and accessible roads for all road users in California



## MISSION

Collaborate to enhance safety for all modes of travel on California's public roadways



## GOAL

Zero traffic fatalities and serious injuries on all of California's public roadways

[Learn More](#)

## More Information

For more information about the California SHSP, please visit  
<https://dot.ca.gov/programs/safety-programs/shsp>

Questions? Comments? Email to [SHSP@dot.ca.gov](mailto:SHSP@dot.ca.gov)

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