Survey of Operation Lifesaver State Programs | 2015 Report
Acknowledgements

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Joyce Rose, Wende Corcoran, Libby Rector Snipe, and other members of OLI’s leadership and staff assisted in communications and survey collecting efforts, graphics, and other support. The AASHTO Publications Production Team collected files and designed the final report.

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Survey of Operation Lifesaver State Programs

2015 Report

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Survey of Operation Lifesaver State Programs
**About Operation Lifesaver**

Operation Lifesaver, Inc. (OL), is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to end collisions, injuries, and deaths at highway-rail grade crossings and on rail property. Operation Lifesaver began in 1972 in the State of Idaho, and then spread to all 50 U.S. states, as well as international OL organizations in Canada, Mexico, Argentina, and Estonia. The Operation Lifesaver, Inc., national office, which was incorporated in 1986, supports and guides the state programs. Operation Lifesaver carries its rail safety education message through a national network of volunteers, who speak to various audiences about the importance of rail crossing safety and warn about the dangers of trespassing on rails. Typical audiences include school children, new drivers, professional drivers, law enforcement, first responders, school bus drivers, and community organizations. Operation Lifesaver also reaches the general public through representation at special events, such as fairs, conferences, sporting events, safety trains, parades, and rodeos.

Additionally, Operation Lifesaver sponsors public awareness campaigns, such as the "See Tracks? Think Train!" public safety campaign, that include television and radio public service announcements, billboards, posters, and other collateral materials to raise public awareness about safety around railroad tracks and crossings. Operation Lifesaver partners with organizations such as the U.S. Department of Transportation, state departments of transportation, railroad companies, transit agencies, law enforcement agencies, and others to more effectively spread the messages of "Look, Listen & Live" at railroad crossings, and to "Stay Off, Stay Away, Stay Alive" for pedestrians around railroad tracks.

The Operation Lifesaver program is a successful public education and awareness model. Since the program was first established in 1972, railroad crossing collisions have decreased by 83 percent, from around 12,000 train-vehicle collisions per year to around 2,000 per year. However, the safety education challenge is still vitally important; about every three hours in the United States, a person or vehicle is hit by a train.

**About the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials**

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan association representing highway and transportation departments in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. It represents all transportation modes. Its primary goal is to foster the development, operation, and maintenance of an integrated national transportation system.

AASHTO works to educate the public and key decision makers about the critical role that transportation plays in securing a good quality of life and sound economy for our nation. AASHTO serves as a liaison between state departments of transportation (DOTs) and the Federal government. AASHTO is an international leader in setting technical standards for all phases of highway system development. Standards are issued for design, construction of highways and bridges, materials, and many other technical areas.
Introduction and Purpose

Over the past decade, railroad crossing incidents across the United States declined by 32 percent while the number of crossing fatalities also decreased by 22 percent. However, in 2013, there were still 2,096 railroad crossing collisions nationwide, and a total of 663 people were killed, either in crossing collisions or because they were trespassing on railroad tracks. With railways across the United States receiving greater demand from different sectors, additional use or an expansion of the system could lead to more frequent interactions with the public.

High-speed rail projects and increased freight shipping are just two ongoing developments that will add to the estimated 212,000 highway–rail grade crossings made by trains each day. These efforts signal the path ahead for both state officials and safety advocates. Subsequently, their partnerships on educational initiatives and other community engagement activities remain essential for accident prevention.

The intent of this report is to be a resource to assist the future work Operation Lifesaver and state departments of transportation conduct. It will review and present findings gathered from a survey effort sponsored by OLI and AASHTO. The survey itself provides a brief overview of state OL organizations and their partnerships with community and rail-related partners. The information from the survey is purposed for use as a resource for future collaborative efforts between OL’s state coordinators and local officials in state departments of transportation.

The report will discuss how Operation Lifesaver’s programs are organized, where they receive funding, and what partnerships exist. An analysis of the collected data and an overview of gathered best practices will also take place. In closing, the report will offer several potential best practices for OL program coordinators and state officials.3

Summary

The survey provided interesting insights into the nature of state OL programs. Generally, their leadership includes a coordinator and an engaged board of advisors/directors. Most states have a point of contact in their respective department of transportation, whether it is an individual or office or both. There are many areas where an OL program collaborates with resident organizations, in addition to ways coordinators strategize to access greater audiences in new communities.

State programs receive funding from a variety of sources. The primary avenues are contributions from railroads or grants. However, few coordinators are aware of funding from various federal or state-allocated sources. Still fewer have coordinated with state DOTs on projects receiving this support. As a best practice, this in addition to strengthening the OL programs’ working relationship with their DOTs and expanding the use of data to target new areas of outreach and education will help the organization move forward.

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3 Conclusions regarding next steps and best practices are the opinions of the writer and do not reflect the official policies of AASHTO or Operation Lifesaver.
Project Process, Scope, and Methodology

This survey was not a traditional, quantitative instrument, but rather focused on descriptive aspects of state programs and was qualitative in design. Instead of a random sampling of individuals, the project sought to gain a high a response rate in order to receive as much information as possible. Therefore, the survey was sent to every OL coordinator. In order to receive responses by the deadline, some coordinators were sent reminder e-mails. The survey was implemented using AASHTO’s Vovici software account. Participants received a link which they then used to access the survey on a hosted webpage. Vovici generated the survey platform and also the initial results for interpretation. Other programs such as Microsoft Office helped generate further tables and visuals.

Background and Timeline

Below is a descriptive timeline of the survey’s process.

2014

- **July:** The project began with a conference call between AASHTO staff and OLI’s CEO Joyce Rose to introduce the survey and clarify the scope of work. Several potential deliverables were discussed along with the overall goals of the prospective survey. The idea of a working group was agreed upon in order to gain critical input for the survey from a cross-section of state program coordinators.

- **August:** Operation Lifesaver assembled the working group with the goal of identifying issues and developing ideas for the survey. This discussion occurred by conference call later in the month. Members of the group included four Operation Lifesaver coordinators from various states and two AASHTO staff members.

- **September:** The initial draft was completed and circulated back through the working group and other stakeholders for comments and review. Near the end of the month, the survey was created and published on AASHTO’s Vovici software.

- **October:** The survey was distributed to state coordinators through OL leadership. OL followed up with reminder e-mails throughout the month.

- **November:** Coordinators submitted their responses until November 3, 2014. AASHTO then began preparing the survey results and report.

2015

- **February:** An initial draft of the report was completed and reviewed several times. Operation Lifesaver provided picture files, which were submitted to the AASHTO Publications Team.

- **April:** AASHTO published the final report and distributed it at the Operation Lifesaver State Coordinators Summit in Orlando, Florida.
Discussion of Survey Results

The survey consisted of 15 questions of varying length and design. With help from Operation Lifesaver’s leadership team and despite several technical issues that arose, 41 programs submitted complete responses for 42 states. The following section provides a walkthrough of the survey by explaining each question posed to OL State coordinators, and their results.

Coordinator Involvement

The coordinator is the primary lead for Operation Lifesaver at the state level, leading the program’s efforts at grassroots events or other functions. The states of Virginia and Maryland, as well as the District of Columbia, are led by a Regional Coordinator. A majority of coordinators (32) from responding state programs are paid, which breaks down into 12 full-time and 20 part-time positions. The nine remaining programs are led on a voluntary basis, either full- or part-time. These are shown in Figure 1, and without more information we do not believe any correlation exists between a state’s geography and its coordinator’s category.

Program Organization

Most Operation Lifesaver programs exist independently as non-profit corporations registered with their relevant state governments, however seven of them have structures organized within another group. For instance those in Connecticut, Delaware, and New Jersey are situated in their states’ department of transportation. Others include Alaska and Illinois. The former sponsors its OL program through the Alaska Railroad Corporation, while the latter houses the program in the Illinois Commerce Commission—along with public utility services.

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4 Due to one of the aforementioned technical issues that occurred while the survey was open, one state program submitted their results by e-mail rather than submitting the answers through the Vovici platform. These results are included within the collective data.

5 Virginia and Maryland’s Operation Lifesaver programs are combined.

and certain other transportation-related functions. North Dakota and South Carolina categorize their OLI programs as chapters of the National Safety Council.

**Program Board Involvement**

Across the responding state programs, the number of board members varies from three to 16 with an average membership of 8 individuals. Two state programs do not have boards. Thirty-five coordinators indicated that there are a sufficient number of board members in relation to their state programs. Two larger states and two smaller states, in terms of population, responded that the membership on their boards was too few. A final two states thought there were too many people on their boards, with a count of 9 and 11 members.

The survey also asked coordinators to rate their boards' involvement with the program's work. As shown in Figure 2 most deemed the partnership on the higher level of involvement end of the spectrum. Contrastingly, 14.6 percent considered the participation to be less than average, and 2 percent thought that their board was not involved.

![Figure 2. State Board Involvement in Program Efforts. Source: AASHTO](image)

**State DOT Connections and Partnerships**

Beyond the internal workings of the OL program for each state, coordinators realize that partnerships can promote their safety message and expand the organization's sphere of influence in communities and other local areas. State departments of transportation are entities that offer opportunities and avenues for furthering these common goals.

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9 Approximately 8.6 individuals.

10 This average was 6.5 people, though one of these states does not have a board.
Of the respondents, 35 coordinators answered that they have at least one contact within their state’s DOT. Several did not list specific names because the number of people was too large. Some state coordinators are also employed by their local DOT in various capacities, an additional connection to their work. Please refer to the Resources section for a link that directs to an Internet page featuring a contact list of state DOT officials and offices that OL coordinators found helpful.

The survey further explored partnerships by asking about how they worked from the coordinators’ standpoint. Four coordinators did not identify any areas where their state DOT helped their program, but the rest of the responses were collected in a textbox entry on the Vovici form. The text was subsequently coded and sorted into categories based on common characteristics. These answers from the coordinators fit within six general groupings. To clarify, we included their programs in more than one grouping if the content of their reply was applicable.

1. **Event Assistance** (total mentions: 31). Helping prepare and implement meetings along with other public presentations sponsored by the state OL program was the most common form of coordinator collaboration with state departments of transportation. In several responses, coordinators point to the additional volunteers they receive from the state to staff larger events. They also cite state assistance in providing venue locations and large fixtures such as booths or canopies. Beyond material supplies, states have also given OL programs opportunities to provide training and talks at conferences, along with the necessary planning and organizational support to conduct those gatherings.

2. **Funding** (total mentions: 12). This area includes grants, lines of credit, or other financial contributions in support of the local OL program. There is one mention of Section 402 funding, but please refer to the discussion of the later question in the survey that asked about program funding for more detail regarding this subject.

3. **Communications** (total mentions: 11). State departments of transportation assisted state OL coordinators mostly in ways that involved interactions with and disseminating information to public audiences, such as coordinating and distributing OL program details on social media accounts and organization websites. Proclamations, press releases, and responses to community concerns were also examples for certain states.

4. **Board/DOT Participation** (total mentions: 11). Several coordinators shared that their state DOT’s involvement was facilitated through a person who sat on the state OL program’s board, but also served in a state government position. This indicates the importance of the board in helping the organization expand its reach for new opportunities.

5. **Data Sharing** (total mentions: 10). Some OL programs and departments of transportation exchange technical information or keep each other updated on the latest rail developments happening in their state. One state places OL safety information in its renewal packets for truck drivers while others assist with crossing issues, locations, and structures. Several others share statistics and updates on rail traffic developments which help identify areas where safety education is needed most.
6. **Materials** (total mentions: 8). These supplies provided by the departments of transportation are either physical items such as paper and brochure materials, as well as the ability to use administrative services such as copying, printing, and mailing.

From these groupings, it is evident that state departments of transportation can provide a range of assistance to Operation Lifesaver programs. While every program’s working relationship and circumstances are different, these are just some of the forms partnerships can take between these two entities.

**Community Partnerships**

In addition to state governments, OL state programs were also asked to consider the partnerships that exist between them and members of their communities. In Figure 3, nearly every coordinator shared that they work with a rail organization of some kind. Majorities also selected local and state governments, schools, museums, civic and non-profit groups, and corporations. Small businesses, non-profit groups, and miscellaneous organizations were the only categories with less than a majority.

![Figure 3. Community Partnerships Maintained by State Coordinators. Source: AASHTO](image)

Additionally, coordinators were asked if they consider any criteria when pursuing these partnerships. Sorting through the responses revealed several commonalities with some degree of overlap and flexibility, considering some states described their process in greater detail than others. First, five coordinators mentioned they welcome all potential partners, and seven said they do not establish criteria. Some qualified their answers by explaining that they prioritize these opportunities when necessary based on other factors such as the number of people or geographic area made accessible. Four coordinators mentioned this as a standalone criterion or in conjunction with other qualities.

Eleven states reported that another organization’s particular interest in or ability to assist with Operation Lifesaver’s mission of rail safety was important. Reaching certain locations within the proximity of target areas such as railroad tracks and properties with higher incident rates was mentioned four times. Financial support was a factor for another four coordinators. Finally, three state programs considered partners that could either provide volunteers for future events, or were available to host OL volunteers.
In order to learn about how these partnerships formed, coordinators were then asked to select which strategies they use to identify prospective opportunities. Figure 4 shows a strong reliance on networking through professional contacts and events in order to help build the relationships needed to increase the effectiveness of the state program. The rest form a second tier based on technology and research methods. Other miscellaneous strategies are unique to specific states, such as hosting quarterly meetings for supporters or engaging with initiatory groups that seek out the coordinator.

Figure 4. Coordinator Strategies for Locating and Cultivating Partnerships. Source: AASHTO

Program Funding

Among the 39 states who responded with enough financial information to analyze, the average amount of funding programs received from all sources during the past year was around $58,000. These funds were nearly split evenly between railroad companies (50.6 percent) and other revenue streams—which include state agencies, Operation Lifesaver, Inc. grants, or non-profit contributions. One program received 10 percent of its financial support from a Federal 402 grant through the Federal Highways Administration. Most of the specified railroads were Class 1 companies, although short line and Class 3 groups contributed to several states.

State departments of transportation contributed funding to 15 states through grants or other means. The range spanned from $1,000 to $100,000, with an average of $36,807.\textsuperscript{11} Operation Lifesaver provided 14 states with support equaling an average of $11,343.\textsuperscript{12} These contributions ranged from $500 to a cumulative $29,000. Certain states received funding from more than one kind of OL grant, or from multiple state agencies. Only seven coordinators received funding from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration through their governor’s Highway Safety Representative.\textsuperscript{13} Their amount was valued from $5,000 to more than $45,000, for an average of $22,928.

The Highway Safety Improvement Program was created as part of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) in 2005.\textsuperscript{14} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Based on 13 states providing specific amounts.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Based on 13 states providing specific amounts.
\end{itemize}
Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) continued this initiative under 23 USC 130 and also set aside $220 million for the Railway-Highways Crossing Program for allocation among the states according to an agency formula.\(^\text{15}\) While half of an individual state’s share is required for protective devices (or warning devices) at rail crossings, other financial support through Section 130 is intended for projects where railroads intersect with roads, paths, or bicycle trails—specifically for “hazard elimination.”\(^\text{16}\) State agencies are also able to use the money as matching funds for projects that are state-funded.\(^\text{17}\) Sixteen of Operation Lifesaver’s state programs are aware of this HSIP funding through Section 130, however only five reported having worked with projects in their state that received this support. These figures could result from ambiguity in how the survey question was worded, along with the law’s requirements. If this is the case, additional exploration would be beneficial. However, partnerships between OL coordinators and state DOTs in this area remain possible, which the Best Practices section discusses in further detail.

**Best Practices**

In considering the previous information, several trends emerged that point to some general best practices among Operation Lifesaver’s state programs and their coordinators. While realizing that each entity is unique with differing circumstances and elements to consider, all are part of a greater mission to improve rail crossing safety. First, continuing to edify or maintain a working relationship with the state DOT is important. The survey captured instances where the OL program-State DOT interaction served as an obstacle or a source of new opportunities for the coordinator’s work.

For example, one coordinator had difficult interactions with his program’s board. That the program’s answer did not include other indications of partnership beyond receiving state grants potentially illuminates this dynamic further. Contrastingly, another coordinator described how recently finding ways to work with relevant offices brought about positive results for their program. The DOT staff frequently assists in helping this OL program identify areas that would benefit from the organization’s educational curriculum. This led to connecting with local groups in the targeted area and successfully applying for an OLI grant.

Second, using available data for evaluation and information sharing is another area to consider. For the former, analyzing trends from rail traffic data or other sources could give insight into companies or segments of the population that may benefit from meeting with Operation Lifesaver. The first best practice overlaps here, as state DOTs may be helpful in accessing or sharing this kind of data with the program coordinator. Information sharing, to the extent possible, is another facet of beneficial communication which helps both partners gain greater understanding. It also provides the state program with a greater platform to reach other areas of the state and potential resources to provide a more influential message.

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Finally, more discussion between program coordinators and state officials regarding where National Highway Traffic Safety Administration or Highway Safety Improvement Program funding is being distributed would be constructive. Despite the limitations OL coordinators face regarding Section 130 funds, for example, they can still communicate with state DOTs in order to provide ongoing or follow-up education for local communities on nearby projects. Doing so will keep coordinators better informed about what relevant work is happening in the states and identify more engagement opportunities at the same time.

Moving Forward

Operation Lifesaver’s work remains both relevant and important given current events and trends within the rail sector. Therefore, its partnerships with state departments of transportation are equally crucial in order to explore additional ways to broaden its message and interact with residents in an effectual manner. By striving to secure available funding and utilizing safety data, communities and neighborhoods will be safer and better informed for the future.
Resources

Survey Questions

Operation Lifesaver State Coordinator Survey

Welcome to this survey focusing on the structure, outreach efforts, and funding strategies employed by Operation Lifesaver’s State Programs. Your answers to these 15 questions will provide helpful information to fellow coordinators and state transportation officials.

1) Introductory Information
   [Name; Phone Number; E-mail Address; City; State Abbreviation; Postal Code]

2) As coordinator of your State’s program, what is the extent of your involvement?
   [Full-time, Paid; Part-time, Paid; Full-time, Volunteer; Part-time, Volunteer]

3) Is your state’s program an independent organization, or does it exist within a broader group (e.g., Safety Council, State Department of Transportation, Railroad company, etc.)?
   [Yes, my State Program is structurally and organizationally independent; Other (please specify)]

4) Please list all the people who sit on your state program’s board, along with their occupations and affiliated organizations.

5) Do you think the number of board members for your state program is effective?
   Choose One:
   [The number of board members is effective.
   The number of board members is not effective because there are not enough.
   The number of board members is not effective because there are too many.]

6) On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not involved and 5 being very involved, how involved is your state’s board in the program’s efforts?

7) Do you have one or more contacts in your state’s department of transportation?
   [Yes or No?
   If yes, what is/are their names?]?

8) What state-level department of transportation offices, if any, have been helpful in your program’s work?

9) Please give examples of ways that your state department of transportation partners with or assists your OL program on projects and activities.

10) What kinds of community partnerships does your state program maintain? Please check all that apply.
    [State governments; Local governments; Schools; Civic groups; Museums; Rail organizations; Non-profit groups; Corporations; Small businesses; Other (please specify)]

11) Are there any criteria you use to determine which partnership opportunities to pursue or engage? Please describe.
12) What strategies do you use to locate and cultivate these partnerships? Please check all that apply.
   [Social media; Professional contacts; Events (networking, conferences, etc.); General research through the internet or news media; Data evaluation; Other (please specify)]

13) How much total funding did your state program receive in the past fiscal year? Please categorize these funding sources (railroad, DOT, etc.).

14) Have you received any NTSA funding through your Governor’s Highway Safety Representative?
   [Yes or No?]
   If yes, how much?

15) Do you know about Section 130 and HSIP funding in your state?
   [Yes or No?]
   If yes, have you worked with it on a project with your state?

State Information: Coordinators and DOT Contacts

Please follow this link to access an Internet page detailing information on helpful state-level offices and officials working in areas related to rail safety:

http://rail.transportation.org/Pages/State-DOT--OLI-Contacts.aspx

or simply scan the QR code below with your smartphone: