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## Highway tragedies prompt campaign to alter trucking law

**Drivers' fatigue** a top issue in safety summit opening today in KC.

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Staff Writer

The crashes transformed Daphne Izer, Opal Smith and other average citizens into activists, who today face off with trucking firms and federal transportation officials during the nation's first Truck and Bus Safety Summit in Kansas City.

Izer, a school nurse from Maine, and Smith, a Warsaw,

Mo., grandmother, both lost family members in crashes involving drowsy truckers. And both are now terrified whenever a big rig appears in the rearview mirror.

The three-day safety summit at the Kansas City Marriott Downtown was called by U.S. Transportation Secretary Federico Pena to bring together federal regulators, trucking representatives, safety experts and activists.

Truckdriver fatigue will be among the more prominent issues, and perhaps the most emotional.

Izer's world shook Oct. 10, 1993, when her son Jeff, 17, and  
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CRAIG SANDS/The Star

Kansas City lawyer Jeffrey Burns is active in the movement to get sleepy truckers off the road.

Behind Burns is the car that belonged to Jeannie Ferguson, who died in a crash linked to fatigue.

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three of his friends were killed when a semi-trailer truck slammed into the car carrying them. A judge sentenced the trucker to jail for doctoring his logs to keep driving that night.

"It was not an accident; it was a crash," said Izer, co-founder of Parents Against Tired Truckers. "It was negligence. And people should be scared to death."

Each year roughly 4,000 people die in crashes involving large commercial trucks, and the vast majority are occupants of smaller vehicles. Trucker sleepiness is thought to be a factor in at least 30 percent of those fatalities, a recent National Transportation Safety Board report said.

American Trucking Association officials will attend the summit. Jim Robinson, vice president for public affairs, said Friday the delegation will "make specific proposals for what trucking is prepared to do to make additional gains in safety." He would not elaborate.

In the past, the association has contended that less than 2 percent of truck-related fatalities are caused by fatigued truckers. The industry also points to a steady decline in such fatalities between 1983 and 1993, although the numbers have lurched back up since then.

By federal law, truckers can drive no more than 10 consecutive hours. After 10 hours, they must rest for eight hours. Citing modern shipping demands and relaxed regulations in Canada and Mexico, the trucking association has resisted proposals to cut the

amount of time truckers can spend on the road.

Kansas City lawyer Jeffrey Burns is quickly becoming a national spokesman for the growing movement to get sleepy truckers off the road.

He cites a survey of 1,249 truck-drivers by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Nineteen percent admitted falling asleep at the wheel in the month before they were interviewed. They blamed unrealistic deadlines and a competitive job market.

Like Izer, Burns never gave much thought to truck safety until 1993, when an area family hired him to handle a lawsuit stemming from the deaths of two girls and their mother, Jeannie Ferguson.

After reaching a settlement with the trucking firm, Burns dedicated 2,000 hours last year to researching and speaking out on trucker fatigue. He lobbied Congress to reduce weight limits on freight, and he helped dozens of families find lawyers in other states to handle wrongful-death claims against trucking companies.

"You talk to them, cry with them and then try to help them," Burns said. "My goal is to see that someone in every town becomes an expert on this issue."

Pena is scheduled to speak today. Other federal authorities scheduled to attend include Rodney E. Slater, administrator of the Federal Highway Administration, and George Reagle, associate administrator for motor carriers.

The federal Office of Motor Carriers is sponsoring the meeting. Its stated goal is to "build a shared safety vision" and to com-

pile 10 recommendations by Wednesday for making highways safer.

"We recognize that the great majority of the nation's 7 million commercial driver's license holders are dedicated . . . professionals who make a living by serving the public in a very difficult job," Slater said. "We want to look closely at every factor involving all drivers in order to determine what defines the truly proficient operators."

The National Transportation Safety Board in January released a two-volume study challenging the trucking association's claim that a relatively small share of truck-related fatalities involve tired drivers.

The safety board studied a sample of 107 single-vehicle accidents and determined that 58 percent were related to trucker fatigue. Those drivers had last slept an average of 5.5 hours.

Federal requirements "do not provide the opportunity to obtain an adequate amount of sleep," the report said, "because they don't consider time needed for eating, personal hygiene, recreation or an inability to fall asleep at the beginning of the off-duty period."

Many truckers involved in fatigue-related accidents did not recognize that they needed sleep, the study concluded.

Relatives of crash victims say they hope the safety summit will educate people about dangers that get little attention.

"The trucking firms are thinking about their billfolds," said Opal Smith, Jeannie Ferguson's mother. "And that's taken a lot of lives."