I cannot overstate it: Families for Safe Streets are people who have lost friends, daughters, husbands, wives, nieces, nephews. And they are among the most powerful advocacy forces I’ve ever seen in politics. To get at that dichotomy of how you feel when you’re behind the wheel versus where everybody’s heart is, that we want our streets to be safer, you really need the human beings who’ve lost loved ones. It reframes everything.

–POLLY TROTENBERG, COMMISSIONER, NYC DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

CHILDREN ARE GOING TO DIE
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Over the past few years, people across the country have reached out to Families for Safe Streets (FSS) in New York City asking for assistance in forming an FSS chapter in their own communities. This guide has been created to offer simple and easily accessible help with that process.

We are so sorry you need this information, but we hope you find it useful. No one should have to go through this process alone. If you would like additional information about our organization, please contact us at info@familiesforsafestreets.org or 844-377-7337.
Carl “Henry” Nacht, age 56, died 6/22/2006; By Mary Beth Kelly, Henry’s wife

Viktor Frankl, wrote in, Man’s Search for Meaning, that meaning came from three possible sources: purposeful work, love, and courage in the face of difficulty. And whenever I think about the man I was married to for thirty-three years — Carl Henry Nacht, better known to family as “Henry,” I am immensely grateful to have shared my life with someone who embodied Frankl’s three. Henry was a beloved physician committed to patient care, an athlete who held a record for running twenty-six consecutive New York City marathons (mostly under three hours), a husband/father who loved our children and me passionately, a coach of soccer and basketball and baseball, and a person who faced many difficult times in his life with courage. Life was cherished and deeply meaningful to Henry.

On a warm summer night, that man, whom I celebrated, and who knew me better than anyone, was riding his bike next to mine when he was hit by a reckless tow truck driver. He died three days later from his profound injuries.

In the days and weeks that followed my husband’s death, when I could not focus, could barely breathe, I reached for poetry. There I found the broken shards of my heart in poets like Marie Howe, Donald Hall, and W.H. Auden. Nothing spoke to me so clearly as Auden’s poem, Funeral Blues. Particularly this stanza, which I read at his memorial:

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong

Grief too can seem as though it will last forever, but as the Buddhists know and remind us, everything in this life is temporal; even grief, will eventually move. Poetry and to be in nature soothed me, and soon I reached for a pen. Composing on the page took on more meaning than it had before my loss, and slowly it became a crucial part of my life. It followed too, that writing was one way to be an activist raising awareness about the terrible price and injustice of traffic violence. And in joining my voice to that of Transportation Alternatives twelve years ago, and years later with Families for Safe Streets, I turned my anger and grief into successful advocacy and activism for a more livable safe city; turning forbidding streets into forgiving ones. Nothing since Henry’s death has given my own life — already a full one — more meaning than this work in a great metropolis, where it is possible to make a difference.
Who Are We?

Families for Safe Streets (FSS) is a project of Transportation Alternatives (TransAlt), a 45-year old non-profit advocacy organization in New York City for walking, cycling and public transportation.

FSS was formed in 2014 by people who were personally impacted by traffic crashes, whether through serious injury or the loss of loved ones—such as parents, spouses, siblings, or children. We fight for safer streets in NYC and also provide a range of support services.

Ours is a growing movement to fight for safe streets in New York City -- hundreds of members, representing the full spectrum of New York City’s diverse population -- working tirelessly for awareness, policy change and legislation.

Although the New York State legislature is notorious for its slow pace (with initiatives often taking a decade or more to become law), we surprised everyone with a victory in our first year of existence. Law was passed lowering the NYC speed limit on most roads to 25 mph.

We also committed to pressing for the redesign of New York City’s most dangerous street, Queens Boulevard, known as the Boulevard of Death for the large number of people killed each year while walking, biking or driving on the road. The Mayor supported these efforts and, after several phases of re-engineering the road with safety as a priority, Queens Boulevard has been transformed into a Boulevard of Life.

We followed that effort by helping to pass a “right of way” law, which established a legal basis for prosecuting motorists responsible for traffic crashes in NYC. The law makes it a criminal misdemeanor to strike a pedestrian or bicyclist who has the right of way.

We also succeeded in lobbying for a speed safety camera program in NYC. The initial trial program allowed for the installation of 140 speed cameras in front of schools in the city, and we are now hard at work on the expansion of the program to protect every school in New York City.

Additionally, we have an ongoing campaign to change the language around traffic collisions, from “accident” to “crash,” in order to emphasize that these events are preventable. Numerous media outlets, including the New York Times, have taken notice and published articles on the topic, and we convinced the Associated Press to change their official style guide, so that reporters around the world now have authoritative guidance for using the word “crash.”

As of 2018, the annual number of traffic crash fatalities is down in NYC, while it’s up most everywhere else in the country. This can largely be attributed to the work of FSS and its members. Some of us had been waging solo battles for many years prior to the creation of FSS, but by joining forces, our collective voices are now far more effective.
You may already be familiar with these horrifying statistics:

Each year, 1.25 million people are killed around the world in traffic crashes involving cars, buses, motorcycles, bicycles, trucks, or pedestrians – **this is typically 3,287 lives lost every single day.** Half of those killed are walking or biking.

Forty thousand Americans are killed in traffic crashes every year and the numbers have risen for the first time in a half-century. In the past two years, deaths in traffic crashes are up 24%.

In NYC alone, every 38 hours someone is killed in a traffic crash. Two hundred people are injured every day. Thousands of the injuries are life altering.

The US is one of the most dangerous industrialized nations – we are ranked 42 of 51 high income nations in terms of per capita traffic fatalities. Others have dramatically reduced the number of people killed in their countries. Here in New York City, we have started to put in place solutions that save lives. Unlike in the rest of the country, traffic fatalities have declined by 15%. But too many people are still suffering. We can and we must do better.

Each year, 1.25 million people are killed around the world in traffic crashes involving cars, buses, motorcycles, bicycles, trucks, or pedestrians -- **this is typically 3,287 lives lost every single day.** Half of those killed are walking or biking. An additional 20-50 million people are injured or disabled. In the United States alone, there are 100 deaths a day with over 40,000 people killed annually in traffic crashes.

The World Health Organization ranks the United States 41 out of 52 out of high-income nations for road traffic deaths.

According to a report in the journal Health Affairs, the U.S. is now “the most dangerous of wealthy nations for a child to be born into,” based in part on vehicle-related crashes. Among American teenagers aged 15 to 19, such crashes are the leading cause of death.

In terms of sheer numbers, vehicle-related mortality rivals the opioid crisis as the biggest public health crisis in the U.S., yet these deaths are largely preventable. If the U.S. could only match the far-from-perfect average safety performance of other countries, there would be 20,000 fewer Americans killed annually and almost a million fewer injured.
Why Create a Chapter?

These eye-popping numbers alone could be motivation to want to do something about the problem. But if you’re reading this, you likely have much more personal motivation.

For those who are ready, FSS can provide a positive, therapeutic outlet for grief, rage and sorrow. Although it can be painful to do this kind of advocacy work when one still has raw feelings, there is research showing that it can also be very healing.

It provides a way to channel grief into positive action, and that in and of itself can help in one’s recovery. Not that one ever fully recovers from such a terrible loss, but when you meet other people who have suffered similar losses, you realize you’re not so alone, which can be a balm for the soul.

Furthermore, it is because of our loss that our voices give moral imperative to the work—and it makes it much harder for political leaders to ignore us.
Why Should You Partner With An Advocacy Organization?

FSS is a project of Transportation Alternatives (TransAlt), a 45-year old non-profit advocacy organization for walking, cycling and public transportation.

We decided early on that it was important to “partner” the FSS group with an existing organization, because most of us had become advocates “unwillingly”—we had not intended to become activists prior to our collisions, and we lacked crucial knowledge and skill. We needed outside expertise in advocacy work and in grassroots organization building. We also needed political connections if we wanted our efforts to result in real change.

TransAlt brought all of that to the table, jump-starting FSS without us having to reinvent the wheel. TransAlt had a strong organizational infrastructure already in place along with an equally strong fundraising capacity. Even more important was TransAlt’s deep knowledge about transportation and street safety issues and their well-established connections to politicians and community leaders.

We believe that in order for an FSS chapter to be effective, you need a strong, committed advocacy organization that will provide staff support, financial assistance and advocacy strategy guidance.

Local transportation and street safety advocacy groups now exist in most states, and though some may focus more on other issues, such as bicyclist safety, there is enough potential overlap for mutual benefit. You stand to gain from their knowledge and experience, and they have much to gain from the moral authority you bring to the issues, which is something you can point out when courting them.

The members of an FSS chapter bring a moral urgency to their declarations that larger advocacy organizations do not possess. We can shame politicians and journalists into paying heed, which can amplify the organization’s efforts and possibly lead to breakthrough on issues that may have stymied them for years. You bring a human face to statistics that can otherwise seem meaningless, and you can give government agencies the backing they need to resist the inevitable push-back against street safety efforts. By teaming up with you, a larger organization can move its advocacy forward in ways that were not previously possible.

FSS members are also not the typical street safety advocates and bring a new set of personal and professional connections. This has resulted in additional fundraising for TransAlt. Our members also have worked with TransAlt staff to build a coalition of over 300 organizations including unions, hospitals, social services organizations and schools, which have supported our legislative campaigns. FSS members brought many new organizations to the coalition, but there are also others who were inspired by the moral imperative we presented.

But this assistance is not a one way street. There are things you should expect in return, and you need to be clear about them from the outset so that the relationship is not exploitative of your group and your members’ losses.

The organization you choose to partner with will need to commit a significant amount of time and resources. They are not just a fiscal conduit. They will be responsible for helping to set the agenda for the group, though
it is very important that the group itself has a say in what that agenda is going to be. It is essential that FSS be true grassroots advocacy with the members fully empowered in setting the priorities and the direction of the group.

The organization’s staff should expect to organize and facilitate meetings, provide leadership and media training (including social media), guide strategic planning, fundraise, and liaise with experts who can help with all of the above. Staff will need to attend every meeting at the start and will likely be responsible for logistical tasks as simple as providing food for a meeting, helping set the agenda and, depending on the need, co-leading meetings.

And this involvement doesn’t cease once the group is off the ground. TransAlt continues to attend every FSS Steering Committee meeting, helping us identify our legislative goals. They bring their base of supporters to every large event, adding to the size of rallies and marches where we provide the emotional testimony that garners media and political attention to our mutual issues.

FSS and TransAlt strive to foster a true partnership. Transalt supports our initiatives equally to their own.

We have tried to ensure that other chapters are also true partnerships. Advocacy organizations such as Walk San Francisco, Bike Austin, L.A. Walks, the Philadelphia Bicycle Coalition and others have all worked hard to empower families while also providing the necessary support, training, technical assistance and leadership development.

You should expect and work towards creating this kind of relationship as well.
Getting Started

Once you have identified a partner organization, invest time in planning the first meeting. Think about how you want to spend the time. If it’s a larger group, consider breaking up into pairs or small groups for people to discuss what brought each of them there. Also consider hiring a facilitator.

Be prepared to invest a lot of time to get the chapter started. Have realistic expectations.

Not everyone will want to speak out about his/her grief and trauma. Especially if it’s recent. And there will be unavoidable tensions in a group with such strong emotions and hyper vulnerabilities. It takes a lot to bring family members and survivors to this work. It will take a lot to invest in training them.

FSS convened for the first time in February 2014. We had nearly thirty people at our first meeting, and we hired a professional facilitator trained in a group meeting approach called the “Art of Hosting.” It is a very participatory and interactive approach, based on the belief that people participate more in small groups and are more likely to become engaged when each person has a voice in the process.

It was a very emotional and effective day. People shared their pain, bonded with one another, and created a level of trust that was essential for everything that followed.

We had thirty people and forty ideas. To be effective, you can only work on one, maybe two or three things. How do you pick those? Where is the best place to invest our time and money? That’s strategic planning: picking topics to tackle and how you’re going to tackle them. And that is your top priority.

You also need to decide who is in charge and how to determine that.

Set up a clear decision making process and a leadership structure, e.g., officers, steering committee, etc. Once you have these roles filled, by-laws should be written.

Then confirm that there is sufficient interest and a commitment to starting a chapter. If so, the advocacy organization will need to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with TransAlt to officially become a chapter. The MOU spells out the expectations for the advocacy organization and has some other requirements about how the name may be used as well as requirements for national fundraising.

Once you’ve committed to forming a chapter, decide how often you want to meet and develop a schedule for the meetings, as well as potential agendas for the meetings. These decisions may be decided by the group at large or by the officers. That is something you will also need to decide, meaning you will need to define methods for making team decisions as well as methods for carrying them forward.
The Next Steps

Sometimes new chapters assume that their primary role is community education. So they focus on sharing their stories with the larger community, for example, talking to schools in order to help students change their behavior and become better drivers.

But research shows that change only comes with bold changes to law and policy, and it is in forging that kind of political change that we have the most to offer.

We know that focusing on investing in Complete Streets (designs that are safe for all road users) and policies that prioritize safety over speed are the most influential components of traffic safety. While education may play supporting roles, efforts should not lead with or over-emphasize these aspects. It is critical to focus on what works, even though these efforts are often more politically challenging.

Yes, telling your story to a few teenagers, it might get some of them to change their driving habits. But telling your story to a city council or a state legislature can result in laws that force large numbers of people to change their driving habits. We recommend (and Vision Zero supports) an “upstream” or systemic approach to change. We are not trying to change one person’s behavior at a time, but rather to influence the systems that affect significant numbers of people—such as the roadway design (Complete Streets) and safe speed policies (such as lower speeds).

In order to have successful events, it’s recommended that there always be a plan of action put together by the leadership in collaboration with the advocacy organization. It is also beneficial to have some kind of ongoing education for members before events as well as talking points to help them maximize their effectiveness.

Marketing can also play an important role in the group’s success. It gives the group visibility—to the outside world, the media and future potential members—and it helps promote group identity. A website should be created hosted by the advocacy organization as well as social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) There should be t-shirts for members, campaign-pin buttons, etc., ideally with the FSS logo and color scheme as well as your city name to “brand” materials. This is not to “sell” the group so much as to help “define” it and to help members take pride in being part of it. We recommend having a dedicated phone
line with a personal and welcoming message so that crash victims can reach out. Also set up a general email address (e.g., info@familiesforsafestreetsSF), which will need to be checked regularly or auto-forwarded. These are all the things an advocacy organization can assist you in creating in addition to setting up a Google Group or other email mechanisms that make it easier for group members to communicate and plan.

Once you have created promotional materials, you will need to decide how to grow the organization. That is also how you will increase the volunteer pool for the advocacy events, which will be a central part of the group’s work.

As you grow the organization, you will also need to address whether the group is going to focus solely on advocacy or also offer support services. When we started out, we were a small, tight-knit group. As we grew, we decided it was important to formalize the kind of informal support we had been providing one another at the start.

We modeled our efforts on those of other victim advocacy groups—such as MADD, Road Peace, and Harlem Mothers Save—and started to offer a range of support services, including peer mentoring, support groups, speaker series, and logistical assistance with newly injured survivors and grieving families.

We also have a lengthy online resource guide that you are welcome to reference or modify to reflect the laws and resources in your community.

Clearly, these are tasks for once the chapter grows. An essential priority is identifying and grooming future leaders of your chapter.

But before that you will need to decide, in collaboration with the advocacy organization, how you want to officially launch your chapter. It can be a major press opportunity. Consider announcing it at your first public event, possibly even on the World Day of Remembrance, held the 3rd Sunday in November. Or use the World Day of Remembrance to bring more attention to your first key effort to promote a specific change. It is a unique opportunity to get widespread media attention.
“

Sonya Powell, age 40, died 11/27/2009
By Dave Shepard, Sonya’s fiancée

My fiancée Sonya Powell was a warm loving person who meant everything to me. She was beautiful inside, out, and always went out of her way to help people. Life was good. We were in love and looking forward to spending our life together. We had a wonderful Thanksgiving family gathering and we felt blessed.

But on the night after Thanksgiving, we were walking home together when Sonya was struck and killed by a reckless driver right in front of my eyes. And then the driver fled the scene.

I was devastated. And I was angry. I was angry not just at that driver but at the culture of reckless driving, particularly what I noticed in the Bronx. Two days later, crossing at that same crosswalk, I was almost hit by another driver, and a few months prior to the crash there had been a huge vigil for some others who had died in a traffic crash nearby – it was just out of control. In addition, while there have been improvements, it still is out of control.

This is why I got involved and still fight for change.

”
Recommended Outreach Strategies

Due to the nature of FSS, it is not easy to find new members. A good social media and web presence is essential. Wear your t-shirts and pins to rallies, community board meetings, or any other place you gather for an event. It lets people in the larger community know that you exist and that street safety is an issue worthy of your attention and of theirs. Make sure to share your email address and telephone number every time you are in the press. The best way to get members is if they know how to find you after you appear on the news, etc.

You will likely also want to reach out to the first points of contact for crash victims and their families—local police precincts, hospitals, attorneys, the morgue, etc. Consider preparing postcard or palm-card sized handouts for referrals sources to give to crash victims.

You may also want to consider giving presentations or doing continuing education workshops for social workers, hospital staff and lawyers in partnership with these organizations. We have a sample presentation that is on a shared drive for all FSS chapter leaders.

Finally, you should work to get the police to include your information in materials given to all crash victims. This can be challenging but is likely one of the most effective ways for your community to know that you exist.
The Challenges

Expect and be prepared for challenges. This is not easy work. Some things to expect and consider:

• Many of us are in pain and angry—we are not at our best—and this will sometimes complicate efforts at comity and compromise.

• Those who were injured often have survivors guilt and feel uncomfortable around those who have had a loss. And those who have lost parents, siblings or spouses may not feel they have suffered as much as those whose children have died.

• It also can be hard to engage members on the one or two key priority areas selected by the group. Some people may come with a desire to address the issue that caused their particular crash and this may not be one of the current priority areas. We have tried to support people in their individual efforts while still trying to maintain a focused group effort. However, it can be a delicate balance that is not always so easy to do.

• The dynamics of the relationship between members and the advocacy organization can also be complicated. There is potential for exploitation, so you need to empower families and ensure that they are more than just sad faces being trotted out by the organization. But you also need to help families trust the organization and support the larger mission.

• There may also be other challenges between the FSS chapter and the advocacy organization if the chapter chooses to offer support services that expand the advocacy organization’s current mission.

• Your group’s mission may not mesh perfectly with the advocacy group. For example, FSS efforts for streets safety are aimed at everyone, including drivers, which is not totally aligned with the mission of all sponsoring advocacy organizations. A similar organizational challenge is when the advocacy organization is focused solely on cycling. Sponsoring an FSS chapter would mean broadening the cycling organization’s current mission (as FSS focuses on street safety for all users), while FSS members may not be cyclists or even understand why promoting cycling as an alternative form of transportation to cars is part of achieving safer streets. Navigating this can be tricky, but our relationship with TransAlt shows it’s worth the effort to make it work.

• Make sure to create processes for setting strategy, making decisions and allocating resources. We have learned the hard way that a lack of clarity at the start can come back to haunt you.

• You may need to define role of “friends.” Ideally, the friends of people killed/injured would become members of the advocacy organization and plug into existing grassroots efforts for change. But this may not always work, and sometimes they identify more with FSS.

• Most importantly, be prepared that change is slow. This is a marathon, not a sprint. It took a generation to make drinking and driving socially unacceptable. It will take decades for us to achieve the change we want. In hindsight, we needed to pay more attention to the long fight. As survivors and families of victims, we initially worked from a sense of urgency that nearly burned us out. Fortunately the staff of TransAlt, drawing upon their decades of experience, were able to help us adjust our expectations and maintain a more sustainable pace.
Role of Transportation Alternatives & The Vision Zero Network

Currently, FSS chapters operate autonomously and are affiliated in a loose structure so that we can learn from one another, share resources, and support one another. TransAlt is not trying to build a national organization. Instead, they are trying to empower change at a local level, by creating a loose network of groups that can support and learn from one another.

Transportation Alternatives is invested in supporting new FSS chapters by working with local advocacy organizations around the country to help them get started, understand the basics, and begin their partnership, but it is critical that local interests are leading the work and “own” the advocacy.

TransAlt also formalizes the establishment of chapters through a document called a Memorandum of Understanding.

The Vision Zero Network, a national non-profit that provides technical assistance on Vision Zero implementation to advocacy organizations and governments across the nation, also provides technical assistance to chapters. They convene a quarterly call for FSS and advocacy organization leaders, oversee a Google Group email listserv for interested FSS chapter members and advocacy organization staff, and coordinate a shared Google drive to allow chapters to share resources and materials. The Vision Zero Network is an invaluable resource and has lots of information and resources on their website, visionzeronetwork.org.

The Vision Zero Network and TransAlt also work with chapter leaders to plan an array of special activities and events and TransAlt’s annual Vision Zero Cities Conference.
Street Safety Basics

We recognize that family members impacted by a crash do not know much about the policies or solutions to addressing the epidemic of traffic violence and preventing these deadly crashes. While we do not pretend to explain all of them in this short guide, we thought it would be useful to give a brief overview.

There is a new model of street safety being introduced across the country called Vision Zero, that you may want to fight for your city or region to adopt or press for its effective implementation. Vision Zero began in Sweden in 1994 as a plan to eliminate traffic injuries and deaths, and it has now spread to over 30 countries as well as more than a dozen cities in the U.S.

![Comparison chart]

Vision Zero starts with the premise that traffic crashes are preventable, and that system designers and policy makers share the responsibility for making them so.

Unlike the traditional approach that focuses on individual responsibility, a Vision Zero approach assumes that systematic changes are the most important way to address preventable traffic crashes. Crash data is collected and analyzed to determine unsafe locations, and this is followed by a systemic approach to change behavior.

The Vision Zero Network has some wonderful information on their website including Moving from Vision to Action: Fundamental Principles, Policies and Practices to Advance Vision Zero in the U.S. and Why Vision Zero differs from traditional traffic safety approach.
9 Components of a Strong Vision Zero Commitment

Based on the experiences of early-adopter cities in the United States, these nine components have proven to be an effective high-level framework for communities considering a Vision Zero commitment. While these are not the only factors to consider, they are critical aspects to ensure a strong and lasting commitment to Vision Zero.

**POLITICAL COMMITMENT**
The highest-ranking local officials (Mayor, City Council, City Manager) make an official and public commitment to a Vision Zero goal to achieve zero traffic fatalities and severe injuries among all road users (including people walking, biking, using transit, and driving) within a set timeframe. This should include passage of a local policy laying out goals, timeline, stakeholders, and a commitment to community engagement, transparency, & equitable outcomes.

**MULTI-DISCIPLINARY LEADERSHIP**
An official city Vision Zero Taskforce (or Leadership Committee) is created and charged with leading the planning effort for Vision Zero. The Taskforce should include, at a minimum, high-ranking representatives from the Office of the Mayor, Police, Transportation (or equivalent), and Public Health. Other departments to involve include Planning, Fire, Emergency Services, Public Works, District Attorney, Office of Senior Services, Disability, and the School District.

**ACTION PLAN**
Vision Zero Action Plan (or Strategy) is created within 1 year of initial commitment and is implemented with clear strategies, owners of each strategy, interim targets, timelines, & performance measures.

**EQUITY**
City stakeholders commit to both an equitable approach to Vision Zero by establishing inclusive and representative processes, as well as equitable outcomes by ensuring measurable benchmarks to provide safe transportation options for all road users in all parts of the city.

**COOPERATION & COLLABORATION**
A commitment is made to encourage meaningful cooperation and collaboration among relevant governmental agencies & community stakeholders to establish a framework for multiple stakeholders to set shared goals and focus on coordination and accountability.

**SYSTEMS-BASED APPROACH**
City leaders commit to and prioritize a systems-based approach to Vision Zero — focusing on the built environment, systems, and policies that influence behavior — as well as adopting messaging that emphasizes that these traffic losses are preventable.

**DATA-DRIVEN**
City stakeholders commit to gather, analyze, utilize, and share reliable data to understand traffic safety issues and prioritize resources based on evidence of the greatest needs and impact.

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**
Opportunities are created to invite meaningful community engagement, such as select community representation on the Taskforce, broader community input through public meetings or workshops, online surveys, and other feedback opportunities.

**TRANSPARENCY**
The city’s process is transparent to city stakeholders and the community, including regular updates on the progress on the Action Plan and performance measures, and a yearly report (at minimum) to the local governing board (e.g., City Council).

For more visit the Vision Zero Network at visionzeronetwork.org.
Questions or ideas? Contact leah@visionzeronetwork.org.
Final Thoughts

Take the plunge. The worst thing in your life may have just happened. You don’t have much to lose. Starting an FSS chapter can be healing—meeting others, realizing you are not alone, pouring your pain into something productive, and being a part of a growing national movement.
Personal Stories from FSS Members

Additional stories are interspersed throughout this guide.

Some of our members have shared their stories so that you can understand the urgency of this work and how effective our voices are in fighting for change. A few are interspersed above and more are below. I hope they inspire you to start an FSS chapter in your community.

“Victoria Nicodemus, age 30, died 12/6/2015
By Elsa Mauer, Victoria’s mother

Every year, my daughter Victoria pulled out all the stops with her Christmas decorations and was spending the weekend shopping for baubles for the fresh Christmas tree in her apartment. She was smiling and happy with her soon to be fiancé when an SUV driver drove onto the sidewalk, struck Victoria from behind, drove with her on his car for 30 feet, when she fell to the ground and he ran her over. She was taken to the hospital but it was too late.

I was like many parents who feel confident that their adult children would never have anything bad happen to them. Everyday horrors happened to other people. Victoria had lived in San Diego, Chicago and New York, was an Art Curator, a world traveler, and raised to be a productive and caring person. All of this lulls parents into a false sense of security that our children are safe…. until we find out they can be gone in an instant.”
Medhat Sami, age 73, died 6/3/2013
By Kevin Sami, Medhat’s son

My dad was killed in a crash over five years ago on June 3, 2013. He was stopped at a red light when a speeding, distracted driver plowed into him at over sixty miles per hour without braking or swerving. My dad died on impact and my family lives his loss every day and carries this trauma with every step we take.

At first, my dad’s crash and death dominated my thoughts about him. It’s hard to not let such a traumatic loss color every inch of your world. But over time, I’m grateful that the pain of that day has faded some, and the person my dad was has come back into focus for me. He was a brilliant doctor who emigrated from Egypt in 1967 to join the residency program at Bellevue Hospital. He married my mom, Viviane Sami, in 1976, and had three children. He thrived here and built a beautiful, rich life. His was a life of service, foremost to his family and his calling in medicine. He cared for his patients and communities with the same warmth he filled our home with, and he taught us everyday what it means to be a good person and a loving dad and husband. I like to think that when I do something kind, it’s always him doing it with me.

My dad fought his entire life to be here, he really did. Our hearts break for all of the moments he has missed and all of the happiness that has been taken from him. He had so much more to give and to teach and to love - we do our best to honor him by giving and teaching and loving the way he showed us to.
Ariel Russo, age 4, died 6/4/2013
by Sofia Russo

On March 10, 2009, I became a mother. Ariel Russo, my first child and only daughter, was born that day. I held her in my arms and I told her that she was born to make the world a better place. Having her in my life was pure joy. Every day I was inspired by her inquisitiveness, kindness, creativity, exuberance, bravery and love.

On June 4th, 2013, my family and I learned the ultimate lesson about how traffic violence can end the life of a child and completely shatter an entire family; crushing all the hopes, dreams, and plans you thought you had for your future. On that Tuesday morning, my 4-year-old daughter, Ariel Marina Russo, was walking to school hand-in-hand with my mother. They were on the sidewalk when they were struck by a reckless driver. I remember when I got the call at work from the officer letting me know that my daughter and my mother had been hit by a car. I remember the moment he said it, I tried to imagine something minor leaving them with just scrapes and bruises but when the officer told me her heart beats per minute, my legs gave out, I was on the floor and I couldn’t breathe and I couldn’t hear anything because I knew that my daughter’s little heart was giving out as we spoke. When I got to the hospital my husband was hysterical and I knew she was gone.

Going home that night without our baby girl was excruciating, heart-breaking, incomprehensible. Our apartment had her written all over it: her Barbie dream house, her Baby Alive doll, the clothes she handmade for her small stuffed animals from her socks, her art work on the refrigerator, her clothes and shoes all over, and on her bed- the rainbow build-a-bear she had just made. We had to live with a constant sick feeling, like we had poison in us. Our son asked us where Ariel was every single day. When we told him she was in Heaven, he responded “Maybe she’s just playing hide-and-seek because that’s her favorite game” and he’d look around under the table, in the closets, behind the doors. He did this every day for about six months and we had to start therapy for our 3-year-old because we didn’t know what to do.

As for my mother, she was in critical condition, required multiple major surgeries, and had to spend one month in the hospital. She is still in the process of recovering from her injuries today.
I never want this to happen to anyone, ever. I don’t want other parents and grandparents to feel this. I don’t want other siblings to go through this. As someone who knows this loss and this pain, I believe I owe it to all New Yorkers, to all children who walk to school, and to my daughter, Ariel, to do whatever it takes to prevent this from happening to another child, to another family. This is why I pour out my heart and soul out, re-telling my darkest experience. Because even though it hurts to relive, you need to know what I know, so that together, we can change the culture of driving and save lives.

As a mother who lost a child to speeding and as an Assistant Principal at a New York City public school, I pray no parent will have to understand the depths of pain that we know.

Cara Cancelmo, crash survivor

I was a dancer and a college student - carefree and loving life. I had grown up in New York and was excited to be home for a visit during my freshman year. This was my city. I grew up in Manhattan. I loved the liveliness and missed it.

I tried to hail a cab in the rain. I wasn’t planning on crossing the street, but a cab saw me and stopped for me on the other side of the street. So I crossed the street and another cab hit me while I was trying to get into the car.

The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital and my parents so relieved that I had survived.

I was lucky to be alive. But being hit in a car crash is a life altering event. The visceral pain and memories of having a multi-ton vehicle catapult your body into the air is incredibly traumatic - physically and emotionally. My shoulder was shattered and will be a source of chronic pain for the rest of my life. But the emotional trauma was also immense. I relived the crash and became frightened just being on the street. The City I loved became a place I am afraid to visit. My carefree days are now gone. But I channel my anger and pain in preventing these tragedies from happening to anyone else.
Ella Bandes, age 22, Died 2/4/2013
By Ken Bandes

Six years ago, my 23-year-old daughter Ella was struck and killed by a careless bus driver as she crossed the street. She was a dancer, a musician, and an artist. She was a beautiful person, my daughter, and my best friend. Ella was so happy to be a New Yorker and living in on her own after college in Bushwick/Ridgewood – she loved the energy, diversity and the food choices. One day she hauled me into that supermarket down the street and proudly pointed out the ethnic food items in every aisle. She wanted to emulate her brother’s interest in cooking and insisted I help her purchase various food items so she could experiment – with varying results, I’ve heard.

So just as her neighborhood was inclusive of every background and lifestyle, so too does traffic violence not discriminate. There were three people killed at the intersection where Ella died in a three year period - all from diverse backgrounds and circumstances but none of them were spared the repercussions of reckless driving, poor street design and lack of attention to street safety.

It did not seem to us that life would go on, or that it should. What has made it possible to go on is the kindness and help of our community, and the chance to help life go on for others. That is what we honor as members of Families for Safe Streets.

I ask you to do what you can. Even if it feels like a drop, believe that those drops become a multitude, an ocean. Together we can change our communities.
Devan Sipher, crash survivor

I shouldn’t be here.

I shouldn’t be alive. On July 3, 2015, I was run over by a double-decker sightseeing bus while I was crossing Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village.

There’s a traffic video showing me on Sixth Avenue in the crosswalk on a green light.

There’s another traffic video showing the driver of the bus speeding through a stop sign on West Fourth Street before plowing into me head-on. And there’s a video on YouTube showing a river of my blood flowing down Sixth Avenue.

As I rolled under the bus’s wheels I remember feeling grateful—grateful that my head was not under the wheels. I spent three months in the ICU at Bellevue Hospital having multiple surgeries.

The thing about traffic crashes is they don’t discriminate. Everyone is at risk, regardless of race, class, religion or sexual orientation. Every person is at risk the moment you step out of a building. And trust me, none of you want to endure what I’ve gone through.

It took two months before I could stand. I had open wounds for more than a year. I still go to physical therapy twice a week, and I suffer from neuropathic pain that feels like someone is trying to cut off my toes with piano wire. And I’m one of the lucky crash victims.

I have remained grateful throughout this experience. I hope I can also be grateful to know that our movement is spreading... that we are building a national movement for change.

*photo by William Farrington courtesy of The New York Post*
Bernadette Karna, crash survivor

On June 8, 2016, a reckless driver hit me as I crossed the street in the crosswalk with the light. The driver dragged me 50 feet and then fled, leaving me for dead.

While in the ambulance, I thought I was going to die. I couldn’t breathe, as I drifted in and out of consciousness. While in the ER, the pain from the insertion of the chest tube was unbearable. I laid in the ICU recovery room for days attached to various tubes and monitors. I was overwhelmed and in constant pain. My ribs were crushed, requiring surgical fixation with metal plates, and I had numerous other fractures to my back, shoulder, knee and foot. I was in physical therapy for nearly two years and unable to work for twenty months.

Surviving a crash is traumatic, exhaustive and life-altering. Every six minutes, another person in New York City is injured in a motor vehicle crash. The clock is ticking.

Please help us raise awareness and end traffic violence.
Giovanni Ampuero, age 9, died 4/28/2018
By Raul Ampuero, Giovanni’s father

I lost my nine-year-old vibrant, funny, adorable and loving son Giovanni just six months ago. He was the heart and soul of our family. He loved to dance and do crazy things to make us laugh. His smile and laughter were infectious.

After my son passed away I couldn’t even leave my house. I stayed home for a week. It was very difficult, and likely will be for the rest of my life. I cry and I cry, sometimes I sit in my car and I don’t want to go home. I miss Giovanni so much.

It has been very difficult for me to speak out. But I have to do this. Why? Because I don’t want any more children to die. It’s inexcusable for a parent to bury his own son. It’s unacceptable. I know that after I die, I will be with my son, and that knowledge gives me the relief I need to fight. I hope you will join with me in remembering those who have died and helping support an end to the epidemic of traffic violence.
Sammy Cohen Eckstein, age 12, died 10/8/2013
By Amy Cohen, Sammy's mother

My family’s life is divided into two parts - before and after October 8, 2013, when my son Sammy was struck by a reckless driver in front of our home.

Sammy was just two months shy of his thirteenth birthday. A warm, loving, energetic, and bright child. He was full of life. He loved sports and played on a travel soccer team where he was the anchor of the defense. Only a few weeks before he was killed, Sammy rode a 100-mile century bike ride with my husband all around New York City. Sammy was comfortable in his own skin and put on no airs. He made friends easily and was kind. He hugged us every day, regularly said he loved us, frequently held hands while walking with us, and adored his 15-year-old sister.

Just days before he died, he wrote this beautiful short assignment for school about his name:

“Sammy Cohen Eckstein...My name means God heard. It means high priests, and it means architectural strength. My name means pretending times are good, when they are bad. It means leadership, and it means pain. My name was chosen because it sounded like happiness, but that happiness put an invisible weight on my shoulders. The weight of leadership.

I am Samuel, the one who God heard, Cohen, the one who (with my family and ancestors) lead a religion, Eckstein, the one cornerstone among thousands. The one corner that has to support everybody, while withstanding pain and sorrow.

I like my name, I just can’t imagine myself as a Jacob or a Luca. I’m a Sam that’s just who I am. I used to prefer Sammy, but now it sounds too young and childish. Sam is more substantial. It’s a name that sounds like stubborn impartiality and neutrality. That, is who I really am, somebody who is like a moon to the earth. I’m close to the center, but always closer to one side than the other. Sometimes I have a strong feeling about some things but most of the time I prefer to be neutral. My real name is Samuel, but that is such a religious name. I think that religion is something that is there so that you always have hope, so that you can pray to something or somebody to solve your problems. I’m not religious enough to be a traditional Samuel. I think that if I were a Samuel, that is not what it would mean. To me Samuel is always at the extremes. Samuel is either a contented servant, or an angry flame content to kill and devour for power. I am neither a Samuel nor a Sammy, they are too extreme, I am in the middle, I am a Sam. I am like a lake. I look pure and simple, but if look in the right places you can find a lot beneath my surface.”

Sammy was just weeks away from celebrating his Bar Mitzvah. It would perhaps have been the time when he publicly changed his name from Sammy to Sam with his friends and family. But he never had the opportunity to grow up.

His death has rocked the very foundation of who we are and forever changed our lives. It is a struggle just to keep going without him.

It’s been equally horrific to learn that his death is part of a much larger, preventable public health crisis. One that together we could end. So please, for Sammy, be a leader as he was. Join with us and help end this unnecessary suffering.
By Debbie Kahn, Seth's Mother

My only child is dead. Seth was our one and only and he was one of a kind. He did not follow where the path led; instead he chose to go where there was no path and leave a trail. Seth left his mark with his sweet, outgoing, quirky personality, in his amazing art, and with his unique sense of style. When he had an idea of something that he wanted to do, be it his artwork, building something, creating and editing stop-motion animation shorts, going on a study abroad trip to Antarctica, or a stage production, he figured it out. Through perseverance, he would get it accomplished and usually in the most amazing ways.

Seth was excited about pursuing his dream of inventing and designing toys and creating a streetwear clothing line. He was a student at F.I.T. in their Toy Design department. He also had a job with a display company and had just installed the holiday windows at Lord & Taylor’s on Fifth Avenue in NYC as well as the Hudson Bay Company in Toronto, Canada. He had been put in charge of a new account at Lincoln Center and had installed their 50th anniversary display.

Seth said of his artwork, “My inspiration for many of my pieces comes from everyday objects like fruits and vegetables. I try to infuse each piece with irony as well, so they are more than one-line puns. I try to give humor to my artwork as I see life as a place where we can enjoy all that is around us and have fun in whatever we do. I feel that there is no need to grow up and act like an adult if you don’t have to. So, by making my work comedic, and in a way juvenile it keeps me from having to act my age.”

His work and his life were best summed up by the quote he always had at the end of his e-mails, which was a quote from the Muppet Movie by Jim Henson, “Life’s like a movie, write your own ending. Keep believing, keep pretending.”

On Seth’s way to work on November 4, 2009 as he walked in the crosswalk with the right of way across 9th Avenue at 53rd Street in Manhattan, a reckless bus driver made a left turn, running over and killing him. He was just 22-years-old and exactly one month short of his 23rd birthday. I am sure this was not the ending to the movie of his life that he envisioned.

The loss of my child, my one and only, is a tragedy beyond belief. None of our efforts will ever bring him back to me, but I know we are preventing these tragedies from happening to others. It gives meaning and purpose to my life now and is the most important thing I do.
Asif Rahman, age 22, died 2/28/2008
By Lizi Rahman, Asif’s mother

My son, Asif Rahman, was a vibrant, talented young man. He was a poet, a rapper, an artist, a loving friend to many and a loving brother and son. He was full of life and loved to do beatboxing.

He recorded many songs and was planning to release his music CD on his birthday. There are many videos of Asif’s various performances and a documentary on him which can be viewed on MySpace at www.myspace.com/asifrahman and YouTube under the name “metaphysical lyrical wizard” and/or “asifalicious”.

He also was a student at Queens College where he was studying to become a music teacher. Just days before he was killed, Asif was hired as a para-professional at PS 58 on Grand Avenue in Queens.

But on his way home from his new job, he was hit and killed on Queens Boulevard by a reckless truck driver. The driver hit his bicycle from behind and then drove his truck over him, killing him instantly. All his organs were crushed. The truck driver not only crushed his organs, he crushed all his dreams and hopes. After this tragic loss, our house became as silent as a grave. There’s no laughter, no sound of beatboxing, no calling out loud, ‘Hi Mom’. His voice was stopped forever. The truck driver just didn’t kill Asif, he killed all of us as well. It’s a pain which kills you like a slow poison. It hurts me that I will not see him graduate from college, get married, or have a family like most of his friends. The truck driver didn’t only crush Asif’s hopes and dreams for his future, he crushed my hopes and dreams as well.

It’s been ten years since I lost my son. From that day on, I made it my mission to make New York City streets safer, and this is what has kept me going. I found a new meaning of survival by saving lives of others. I do not want any other mother going through the pain of losing a child. I want New Yorkers not to think of numbers when it comes to a fatality. I want you to think of a person, think about their loving families, think how these deaths impacted their families and communities. Think that today it may be someone else’s child or spouse or sibling, in the future it could be your family member or someone from your community.