September 22, 2017

The Honorable Elaine L. Chao
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

I reach out to you today on behalf of the American Bus Association (ABA) and the entire motorcoach industry, to strengthen our partnership with the U.S. Department of Transportation for the safety of the traveling public.

The terrible bus collision that occurred in New York City on Monday, September 18, 2017, between a bus operating under the authority of the Dahlia Group Inc. (US DOT #1788395) and a Metropolitan Transportation Authority vehicle, is yet another tragic reminder that more must be done to ensure motorcoach safety remains the Department’s priority and that unsafe bus operators are kept off the road.

The motorcoach industry is one of the safest modes of surface transportation and most years rivals the safety record of the airline industry. This is an industry, except for outliers, that operates at the highest safety standards and their family, friends, neighbors and colleagues are their passengers.

Yet tragic accidents like the one on Monday occur and the facts surrounding the event reveal troubling warning signs, clearly indicating the operator was unfit to be operating vehicles on the road. The warning signs included: a checkered accident and violation history, as identified through the DOT safety monitoring system; questionable registrations and use of DOT operating authority; fraudulent filings on fleet size; insurance carriers not familiar with motorcoach operations; a long list of interconnected companies and events associated with the company leadership and ownership; and, suspicious company (or companies) information. These factors point toward a pattern of noncompliance, and are associated with carriers involved in these types of horrific incidents. These are warning signs, and taken together, should have set off alarms for oversight officials.
The ABA believes more can be done to identify and then act on these early warning signs, target resources and stop reckless and unsafe passenger operators, before tragedy strikes. While we know that Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and other New York City and New York State enforcement officials will continue to scrutinize the industry after such an event, all too often we see these increased enforcement activities directed at well-run safe companies simply because they are easier to find. Meanwhile, the marginal companies, who put the traveling public at risk, continue to operate under the radar and under the cloak of darkness.

I reach out today to begin forging a stronger partnership between our Association and the reputable motorcoach industry and the Department, to accomplish the goal of ensuring the motorcoach industry remains the safest form of surface transportation. The ABA has a strong history of supporting the safety oversight role of the Department’s Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), and its objective to shut down unsafe operators. We were active participants in the development and implementation of the 2008 Motorcoach Safety Action Plan and its updates, which provided a road map to pair safety research, rulemaking and enforcement activities with outreach. However, we need to further strengthen our relationship, as only through our collective efforts will progress be made toward making our roads safer for all travelers.

For this purpose, I reach out to you to convene a meeting for the explicit purpose of exploring ways for ABA and the Department to work more closely together on motorcoach safety and specifically, identifying warning signs to stop unsafe operators from operating. I can be reached at 202-218-7229 or ppantuso@buses.org.

Respectfully,

Peter J. Pantuso
President & CEO