The American Alliance for Healthy Sleep (AAHS) appreciates the opportunity to respond to Iowa Department of Transportation’s Rest Area Plan.

The AAHS is a national non-profit membership organization comprised of patients with sleep disorders, medical providers and individuals with an interest in healthy sleep. The mission of the AAHS is to improve the lives of patients with sleep disorders through advocacy, awareness, education, and services that benefit the entire sleep community as well as advocate for policy and programs that further healthy sleep for all. Many of the changes being proposed would affect both public safety as well as the sleep health and wellbeing of drivers and others using Iowa highways.

Driver fatigue is well-documented as a major contributing cause for highway accidents. Even if the driver does not fall asleep, drowsiness affects a driver’s ability to pay attention to the road leading to slower reaction times and an impaired ability to make good decisions. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that drowsy driving is related to at least 100,000 crashes and more than 1,500 deaths each year. More severe drowsy driving accidents usually occur on highways and major roadways as speeds are higher, and drivers have longer stretches without a break.

Rest areas serve as a safe location for travelers to stop to rest/sleep, use facilities, and take a break from the road, which all serve to address driver fatigue. The most effective ways to alleviate driver fatigue is for the driver to take a short 15-20-minute nap or to switch drivers (if traveling with a passenger). These activities can both be accomplished safely at a rest area.

Fewer rest stops may increase drowsy driving among travelers and truck drivers as travelers must drive further distances to find a safe place to stop and/or rest. A 1998 study found that the probability of a nighttime, single-vehicle accident increases exponentially when the distance between rest areas increases beyond 30 miles. Although the proposed closures would still allow for approximately one-hour’s drive time or less between rest areas, ideally drivers should have the opportunity to stop every half hour to reduce risk of nighttime accidents.

In your released report, the Iowa DOT recognized that truck parking would be significantly impacted by the closure of the proposed rest areas negatively impacting truck drivers who may need to rest and recover from driver fatigue. A National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) study indicated that 31% of fatal crashes involving heavy trucks can be attributed to driver fatigue. A recent (2019) study found that commercial vehicle fatigue-related crashes were more likely to occur when rest areas are 20 miles or further from the site of the crash. Eliminating the availability of safe parking, whether at parking only or full-service rest areas, will only serve to exacerbate driver fatigue.

The AAHS urges you to reconsider closure of Iowa rest areas that will eliminate opportunities for regular travelers as well as truck drivers to safely rest from the road. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on the Iowa DOT’s Rest Area Plan. Please direct any communications to Melissa Clark, Managing Director, at (888) 787-2247 or mclark@sleepallies.org.