



BLIND SPOT



THREE AND A HALF MILLION TRUCKERS

**HE WAS A WRECKING MACHINE BEFORE THE GRUESOME NEW HAMPSHIRE CRASH.
WHY DIDN'T ANYONE STOP VOLODYMYR ZHUKOVSKYY?**

EACH DAY, THOUSANDS OF TRUCK DRIVERS BARREL DOWN OUR NATION'S ROADS WITH LITTLE OVERSIGHT. THE RESULTS CAN BE DEADLY.

This story was reported by Globe staff Laura Crimaldi, Evan Allen, Matt Rocheleau, and Vernal Coleman. It was written by Allen and Crimaldi.

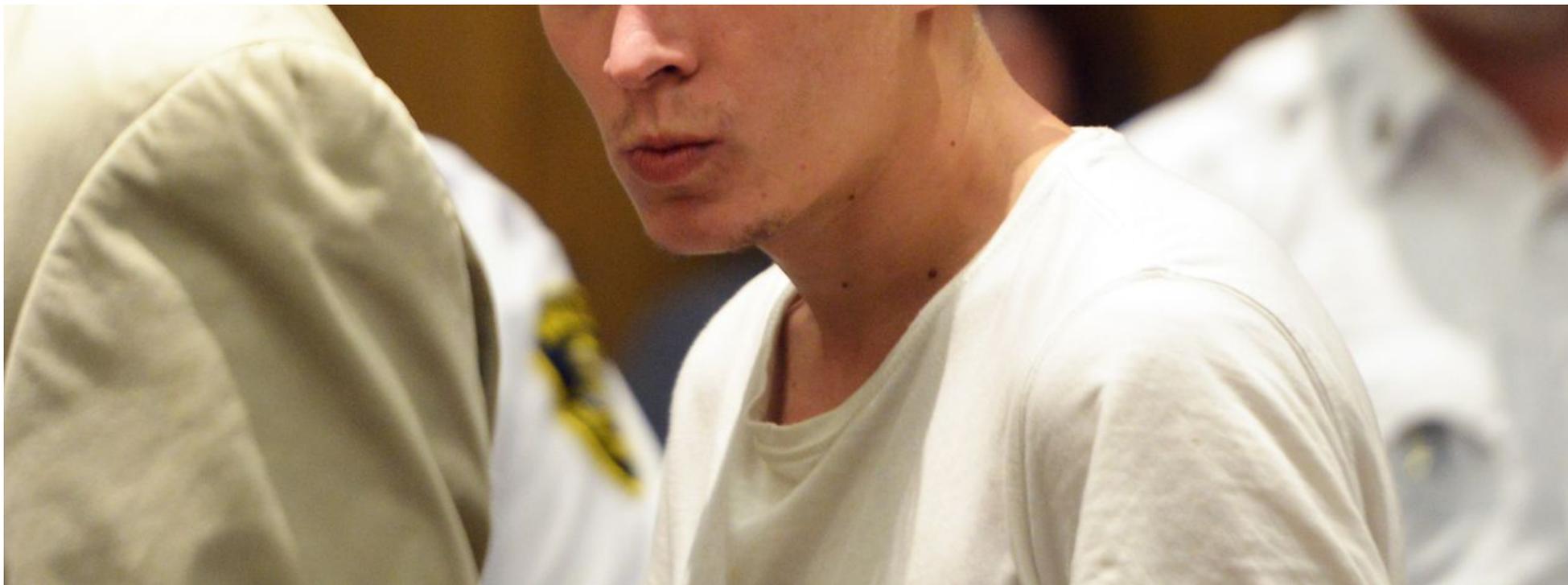
The Gasanov brothers pitched their little trucking company in a gravel lot next to a lumber yard, storing Dodge pickups and trailers between a graffiti-covered brick warehouse and a ring of weeds and scrub in West Springfield. They hired a ragtag crew of drivers — criminals and drug users among them, men who drove too fast and partied too hard — and sent them out onto the open road.

When the trailers broke down, Dartanyan Gasanov patched them up himself and hustled them back into service. When the drivers were too slow, his older brother, Dunyadar Gasanov, called to berate them: “Get there now!”

The drivers of Westfield Transport Inc. racked up more than 60 violations in just 18 months, for speeding, driving unsafe vehicles, and hauling huge loads they weren't licensed for. But no one from the federal agency charged with keeping the industry safe ever stopped them. According to the agency's standards, Westfield simply didn't rate as “high risk” and so it went unchecked.

Instead, as is the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's way with many of the more than half a million trucking companies operating on American roads, Westfield's failures were cataloged on forms with boxes marked “unsafe driving” or “controlled substances and alcohol” and filed away.

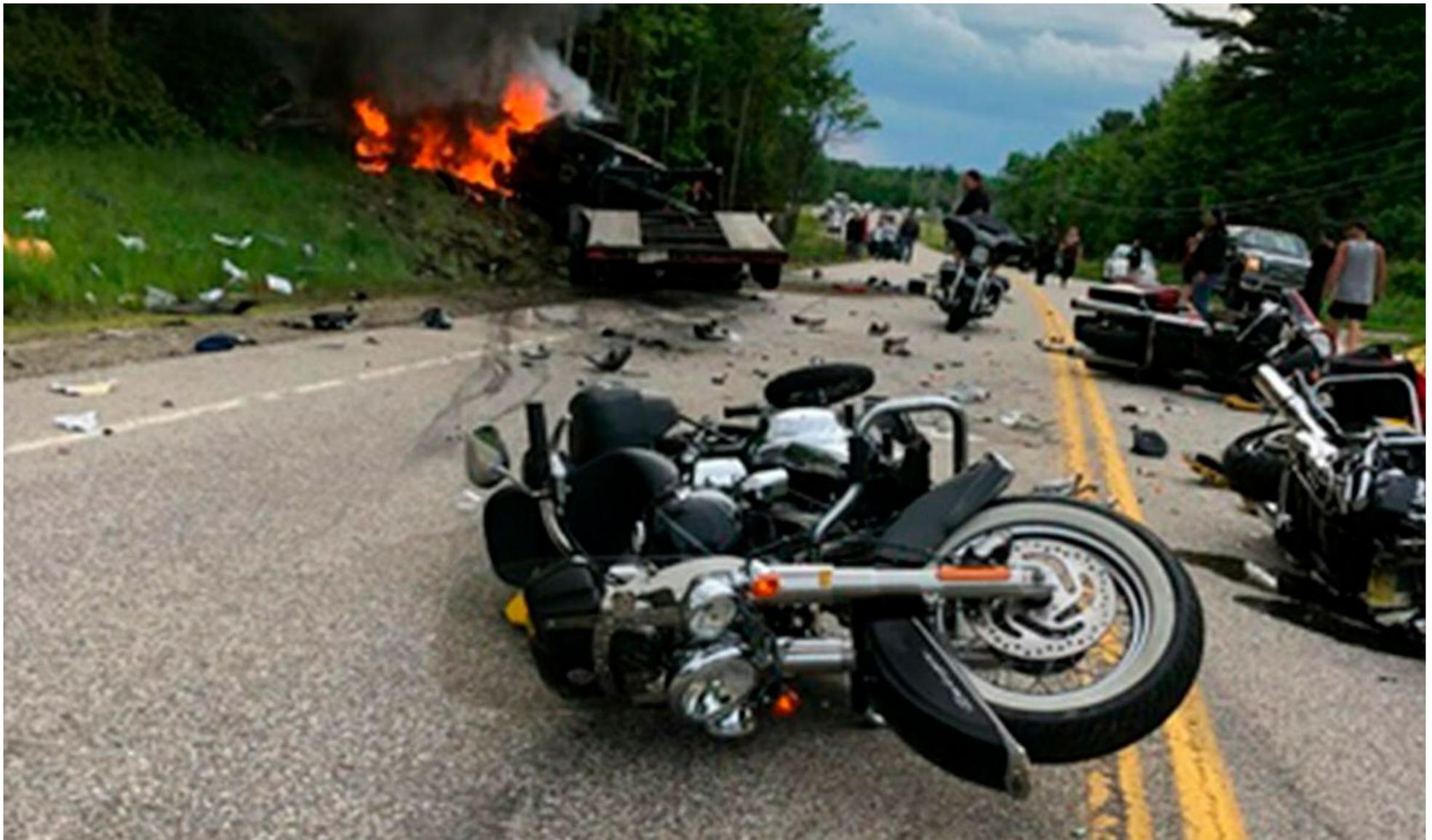




Volodymyr Zhukovskyy of West Springfield stands during his arraignment in Springfield District Court on charges stemming from a crash that took the lives of seven motorcyclists in New Hampshire on June 21, 2019.
Don Treeger/Pool

In June 2019, the Gasanovs hired their last trucker, Volodymyr Zhukovskyy, a skinny, fidgety 23-year-old with a penchant for gold chains, fast cars, heroin, and Hennessy. Driving was his family trade. His father headquartered a livery company out of a ramshackle church office near their home. But Zhukovskyy had been a wrecking machine behind the wheel since he started driving at an early age, leaving a long trail of crashes behind him. He had survived a bad one just a few weeks before. But the Gasanovs gave him the keys, and there was no regulator to take them away. The questions about Zhukovskyy wouldn't draw notice for a few more days, when it was already too late and seven people lay dying on a lonely mountain road in New Hampshire amid twisted metal and flames.





A rural, two-lane highway in the White Mountains of New Hampshire was transformed into a hellish scene after a pickup truck and a procession of motorcycles collided in June of 2019.
Miranda Thompson via AP

They are everywhere on American freeways, but to most drivers, they are almost unseen — a shadowy figure high up in the cab of the speeding behemoth one lane over, a flash of a face above the Mack truck grille bearing down in the rearview mirror. They are the truck drivers who move nearly three-quarters of the nation's freight, powering an \$800 billion industry. Three and a half million truckers traverse about 300 billion miles every year — a population the size of Connecticut's covering a distance equivalent to more than one million trips to the moon. If they all stopped hauling tomorrow, [hospitals would run out of syringes in hours, grocery stores would shortly run out of food, and service stations out of gas.](#)





Interstate 95 is a primary conduit from Florida to Maine for truckers, including this one in Connecticut.
Lane Turner/Globe Staff

Trucking is an enormous and essential sector of our economy. It is also increasingly deadly.

After more than a decade of declines, the frequency of fatal crashes involving trucks shot up by 41 percent between 2009 and 2017.

In 2017, the last year for which complete statistics are available, 4,761 people died in crashes involving large trucks on American roads. That's one person every two hours. That's a Boeing 737 plane crash every two weeks.

The federal agency responsible for protecting American drivers from dangerous truckers, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, meanwhile, has allowed whole swaths of the industry — most strikingly, small upstarts such as Westfield — to operate with minimal oversight, a Globe investigation has found.

Driving was his family trade. His father headquartered a livery company out of a ramshackle church office near their home.

To understand the causes of truck crashes and the feeble regulatory efforts to prevent them, the Globe reviewed National Transportation Safety Board crash investigations dating back to 1971, police reports on truck crashes, and the driving records of truckers involved in fatal crashes across the country. It also reviewed congressional testimony of regulators and victims,

inspector general reports, and federal and state data on highway and trucking safety. What emerged is a maddening picture of repeated regulatory failures punctuated by gruesome crashes and unanswered calls for change.

Among the findings: The FMCSA simply lacks the firepower to wrangle a sprawling industry with a fierce independent streak, which some safety advocates liken to the Wild West. The agency employs only about 1,200 people to oversee a sector with half a million companies that is growing by more than 30,000 businesses every year.

Oversight of dangerous truckers and the companies that employ them is scattershot. The FMCSA has no centralized way to check the backgrounds of drivers, and drug testing requirements are inadequate; recent research commissioned by trucking companies themselves suggests that 300,000 undetected drug users are currently piloting trucks.



**Three and a half million truckers ply the nation's roads, including the Massachusetts Turnpike.
Lane Turner/Globe Staff**

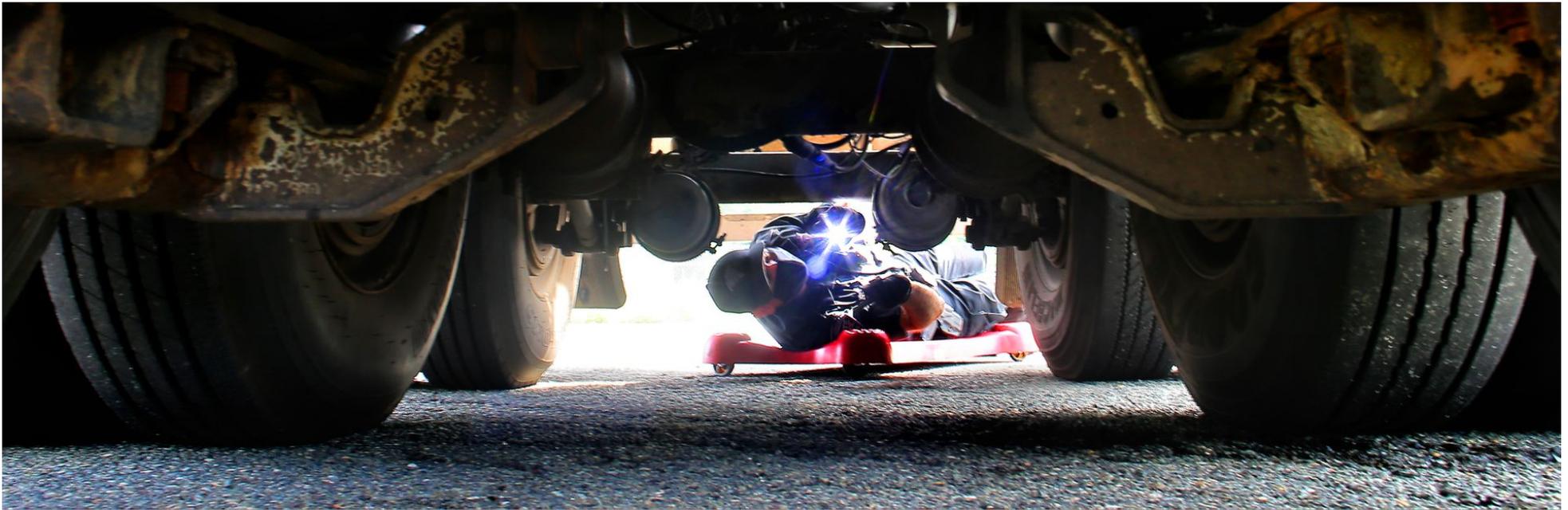
And vehicles are often poorly maintained to the point of peril. Federal statistics show that, on average, one in five of the more than 4 million trucks regulated by the FMCSA is in such disrepair that if it were stopped by safety inspectors, it would immediately be taken out of service.

A spokesman for the FMCSA declined to answer a list of detailed questions about these issues. Instead, the agency provided a statement defending its performance, detailing successful safety initiatives and partnerships. It is responsible for regulating all commercial motor vehicles that cross state lines or haul hazardous materials, as well as all commercial driver's license holders.

"FMCSA's top priority is to reduce crashes involving commercial motor vehicles," the statement read. "FMCSA's focus is always on road safety."

The statement makes it clear that the agency has more resources than its small size suggests: Every year, the FMCSA gives about \$370 million in grants to state authorities, who conduct inspections and enforcement. And it targets the use of its workforce, prioritizing companies with crash rates four times the national average.





Trooper Patrick Scanlon subjected a truck to a full safety inspection. Troopers from the State Police's Commercial Vehicle Enforcement Unit weigh and inspect trucks at the Interstate 95 weigh station in Rowley.
Lane Turner/Globe Staff

The statement also noted several successes, including a program that has dramatically reduced instances of drivers working dangerously long hours. It has also launched a national database that logs positive substance abuse tests for commercial drivers to keep them from lying about failed tests on job applications.

“While there is not a single solution that will prevent all crashes, FMCSA believes these key initiatives will improve road safety and result in a reduction of crashes,” the statement said.

Many crashes involving trucks are caused by careless passenger car drivers. But too many are caused by truck drivers like Zhukovskyy, working for companies like Westfield: obvious threats that the FMCSA failed to see or stop. There was the Kentucky methamphetamine addict who crashed three trucks and four cars in five years; the mentally ill Texas man who spoke openly of smoking synthetic marijuana; the 78-year-old from Ohio who had already mowed down one person with his semi. All three were allowed to keep driving, with fatal results.

“This is not, as we say, rocket science,” said Jim Hall, who from 1994 to 2001 headed the National Transportation Safety Board, the independent federal agency that investigates transportation calamities including truck crashes but does not regulate the industry. “Common sense would dictate that anyone who has a bad record should not be behind the wheel of these vehicles.”

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The NTSB, which sees itself as “the conscience and the compass of the transportation industry,” has been sounding that alarm for decades. Since 1971, when a truck driver with an amphetamine habit, a suspended license, and a record of crashes lost control of his semi in small-town Pennsylvania and incinerated a family of four, the NTSB has been issuing and reissuing the same plaintive warning: The regulatory system that is supposed to keep trucking safe is full of loopholes that cost lives. The plea seemed to get traction in 1999, when the trucking industry’s federal regulator at the time, the Office of Motor Carriers, was dismantled for being too slow, too toothless, and too beholden to the industry. It was replaced by the FMCSA. But history repeats.

The agency has never been funded, or staffed, to execute the mission it was given.

And in time the NTSB was again on the scene of a horrific crash.



The + ***Greyhound driver had just enough time to plead***, “Oh, God, no,” before the windshield exploded. The sun had not yet risen on the morning of June 9, 2002, and most of his 37 passengers were still asleep, when the semitrailer appeared out of the darkness crawling from an on-ramp onto the wide flat stretch of Texas highway ahead. There was no time to stop. The impact collapsed the front of the bus and drove the back of the semi into the bus driver compartment. Three passengers were crushed to death, 29 were injured, and the bus driver was pinned to his seat. As he waited for first responders to amputate his leg to free him, his mind could conjure just one shocked and disbelieving thought:

“Who parked a truck on the freeway with no lights on?”

A driver with just a learner’s permit; a driver high on cocaine; a driver working for a company that answered to nobody.





A semitrailer slowly merged onto a Texas highway in front of a Greyhound bus, causing a harrowing crash and rescue in June of 2002 in Loraine, Texas.
Texas Department of Public Safety

Word of the crash reached the National Transportation Safety Board the same day, and investigators streamed toward the tiny Texas town of Loraine from Washington, D.C., and Fort Worth, Texas, to interview witnesses and pore over the wreckage. To the NTSB, the crash was no shock at all. It was, instead, emblematic of crashes they'd seen again and again: a fly-by-night company, unscrutinized, sent a deadly driver out onto the road. But the NTSB had a plan.

"What we'll do," an agency spokeswoman told The Dallas Morning News, "is use this accident to highlight safety issues that
<https://apps.bostonglobe.com/2020/08/metro/investigations/blindspot/part-2/>

What we need, an agency spokeswoman told The Dallas Morning News, is use this accident to highlight safety issues that exist.”

David Rayburn, who headed the Loraine investigation for the NTSB and still works for the agency, remembers it clearly: The company that owned the truck was less than 2 years old, run by a man on probation for drugs who had lied to the FMCSA about his criminal background and about his brother and business partner, a felon. They didn't bother to conduct required background checks or drug tests on their drivers, who notched violation after violation on roadside inspections. Twice, the FMCSA had almost shut them down for losing their insurance coverage.

As they sifted through the evidence, Rayburn and the other investigators realized there was a common-sense solution that might have kept the driver and the company that employed him off the road.

New trucking companies are required by the FMCSA to file reams of paperwork before they can open up shop, promising that they understand and will comply with regulations, but no one from the agency makes them prove it. No one checks whether they're telling the truth about their background. There's no vehicle inspection, test, or in-person safety audit before a new company is allowed to put vehicles 20 times the size of passenger cars out on the highway.

Watch the short documentary: See the crashes, hear from those who have lost loved ones, and understand the government failings that led to these tragedies. Joshua Morin struggles to recover from a deadly New Hampshire crash. In Wisconsin, the Rizzo family suffered an unimaginable loss.



Produced by Caitlin Healy, Brendan McCarthy, and Anush Elbakyan. Shot and edited by Caitlin Healy.

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This means that companies like the one in the Loraine crash operate unproven during their early, formative months in business, the very time when they are most in need of oversight. Federal statistics from 2015 show that new companies have a crash rate almost 60 percent higher than established ones.

So the NTSB made what seemed like a simple and powerful recommendation to the FMCSA: Before granting a company permission to operate, make its owners pass a test on safety regulations; inspect their vehicles; and conduct a safety audit, reviewing their safety data and conducting an interview to identify deficiencies. The Department of Defense established such a system for companies that wanted to transport military personnel in 1992, the NTSB wrote, and over the next decade did not have a single fatality.

The FMCSA resisted.

More than 30,000 companies enter the market every year, the FMCSA said. An agency with a staff of a little more than 1,000 could not possibly test, audit, and inspect every single one without creating a massive backlog. And fulfilling the recommendation would not only be a logistical nightmare, but a massive barrier to entry for small businesses.

Regulators “are really swimming in the deep end of the pool without any help,” said Annette Sandberg, who led the FMCSA from 2003 to 2006 and dealt with the efforts to evaluate the recommendation. “The agency has never been given enough resources.”

That’s quite a contrast to the money spent regulating the airline industry. In 2020, the Department of Transportation spent 25 times more overseeing aviation than trucking, reflecting, in part, the headline-grabbing nature of plane crashes that make air

times more overlooking aviation than trucking, reflecting, in part, the headline-grabbing nature of plane crashes that make air safety a national focus. By contrast, trucking disasters that kill two or four or six at a time rarely capture the nation's attention, and there is little public pressure for change.



One rig pulled out as another began to park at the Flying J truck stop in Jeffersonville, Ohio.
Blake Nissen for The Boston Globe

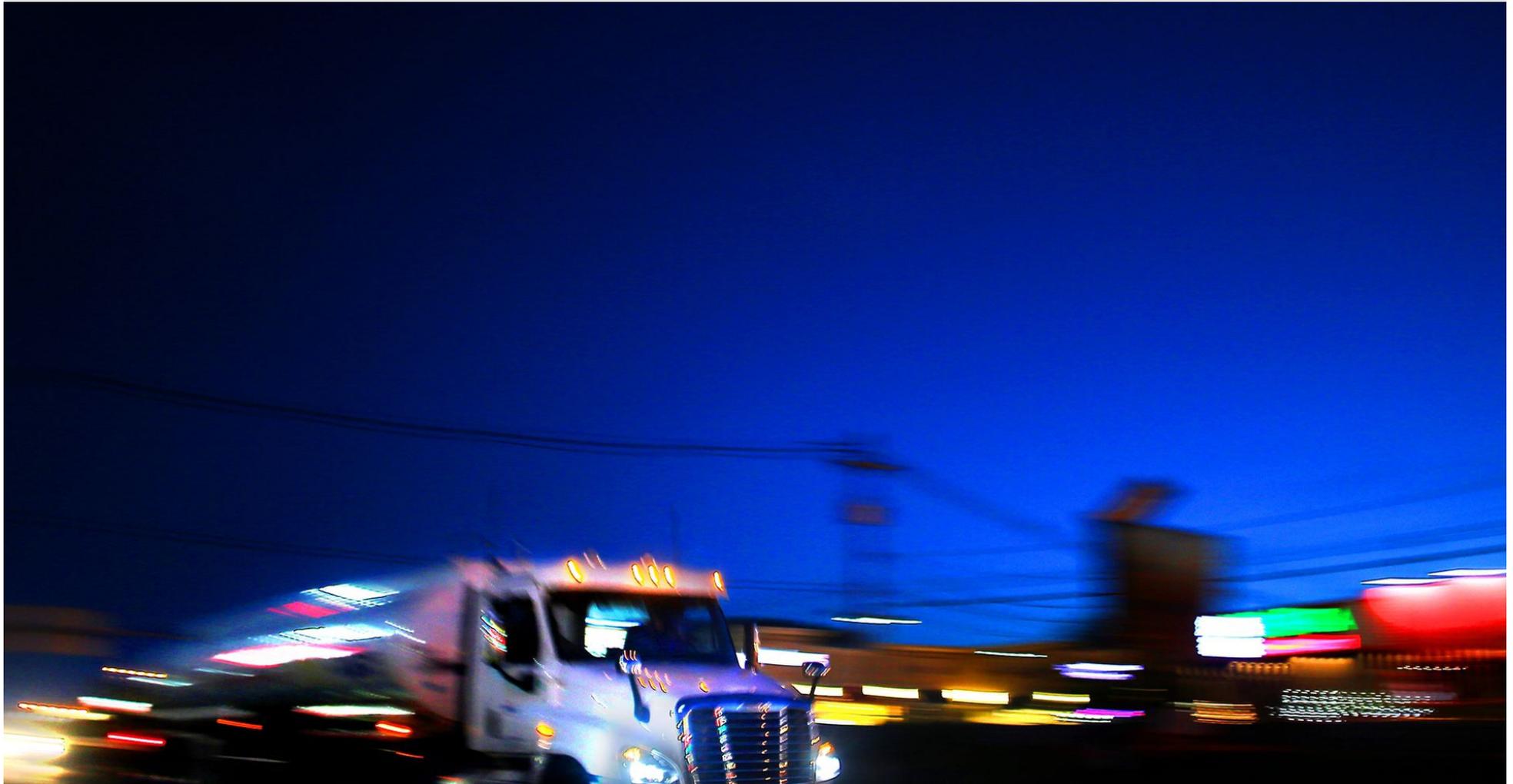
Indeed, the FMCSA is increasingly dwarfed by the industry it oversees. Before 1980, when trucking was deregulated, there were fewer than 20,000 trucking companies operating on American roads, and most were big businesses. Today, there are more than half a million — and more than 90 percent are small-time outfits like Westfield, with 10 trucks or fewer. Many of

more than half a million — and more than 90 percent are small-time outfits like Westfield, with 10 trucks or fewer. Many of these are businesses with razor-thin profit margins, run out of basements and bedrooms, their names written in pen on small-town mailboxes. To regulate all that, the FMCSA deploys a limited staff that is responsible not only for the trucking industry, but the entire busing industry as well.

“You felt like you were drinking out of the fire hose,” Sandberg said of her time at the helm.

Unable to police the entire industry, the FMCSA focuses on the companies that get caught over and over again failing to meet basic safety standards and those with high crash rates. But the agency’s regulatory net is so full of holes that swaths of the industry pass through undetected.

Compliance with many of the agency’s requirements is increasingly monitored remotely, often with paperwork that companies simply send in, with little verification or first-hand observation.





**Route 1 is a main thoroughfare for truckers servicing businesses north of Boston.
Lane Turner/Globe Staff**

The FMCSA does get information from traffic stops by police and unannounced roadside inspections conducted by state regulators at weigh stations around the country. But that provides a haphazard picture at best: More than a million of the 4.6 million commercial vehicles the FMCSA regulated in 2018, for example, were not stopped once through the entire year, according to federal statistics.

Even the bad actors that regulators do get in their sights are rarely prevented from operating. In 2018, the FMCSA allowed almost 17,000 trucking companies to continue operating despite having a less than satisfactory safety rating from the agency. As a result, people die in preventable accidents, sometimes in alarming clusters.

Take one deadly period in 2013. In March, a truck operated by a troubled company that the FMCSA had investigated and found safe enough to operate just five days earlier slammed into an SUV on a highway in Kentucky, killing six people from Wisconsin, including an 8-year-old.

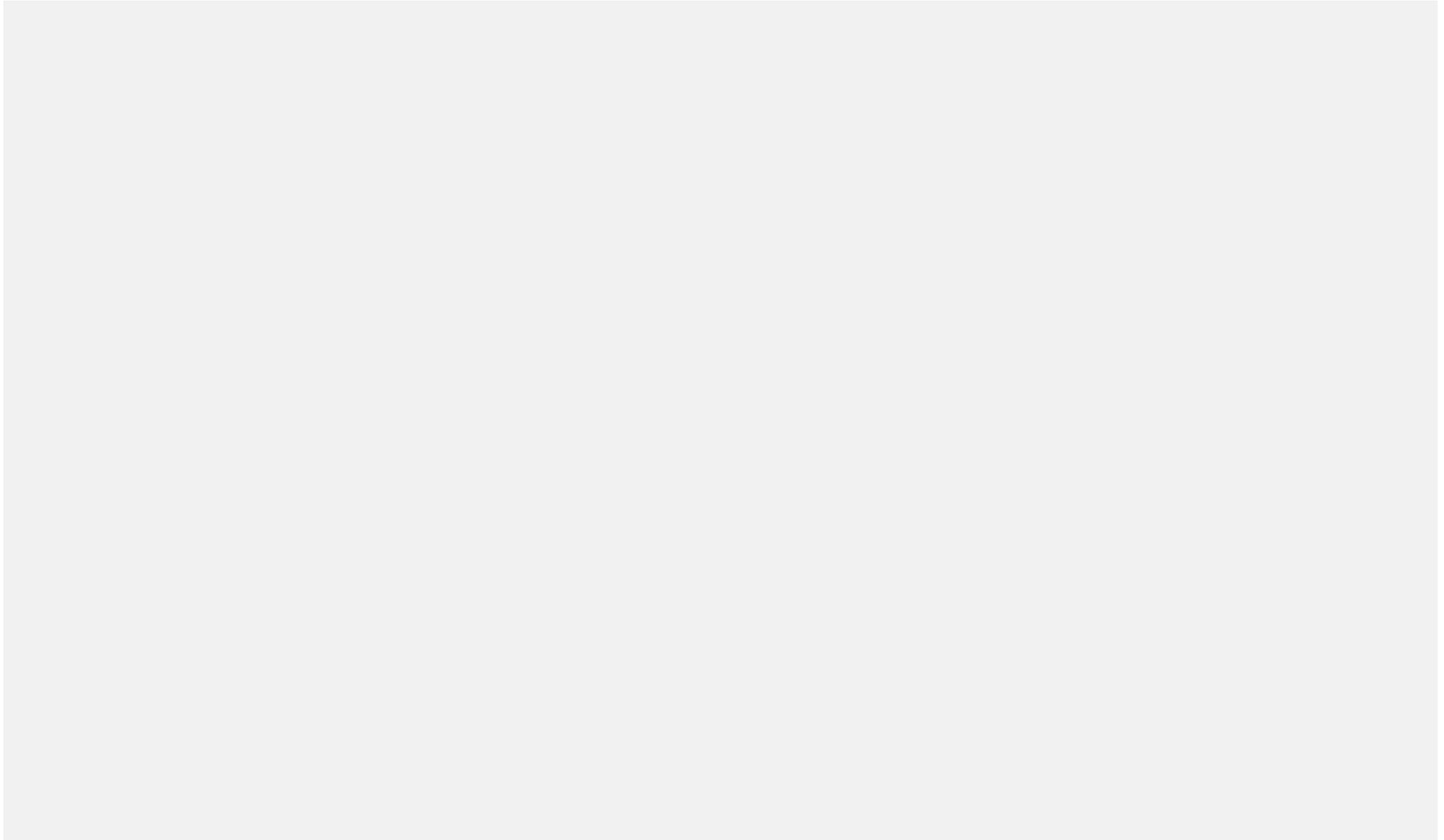
Less than three months later, a Mack truck belonging to a company that was allowed to keep operating even though it had flagrantly flouted regulations for two years smashed into a freight train carrying volatile chemicals in Maryland, causing a massive explosion and fire and injuring five.

Two weeks after that, a truck operated by a company with a history of drivers falsifying logs to hide dangerously long hours behind the wheel crashed into a line of highway traffic in Tennessee, killing a couple headed to a music festival.



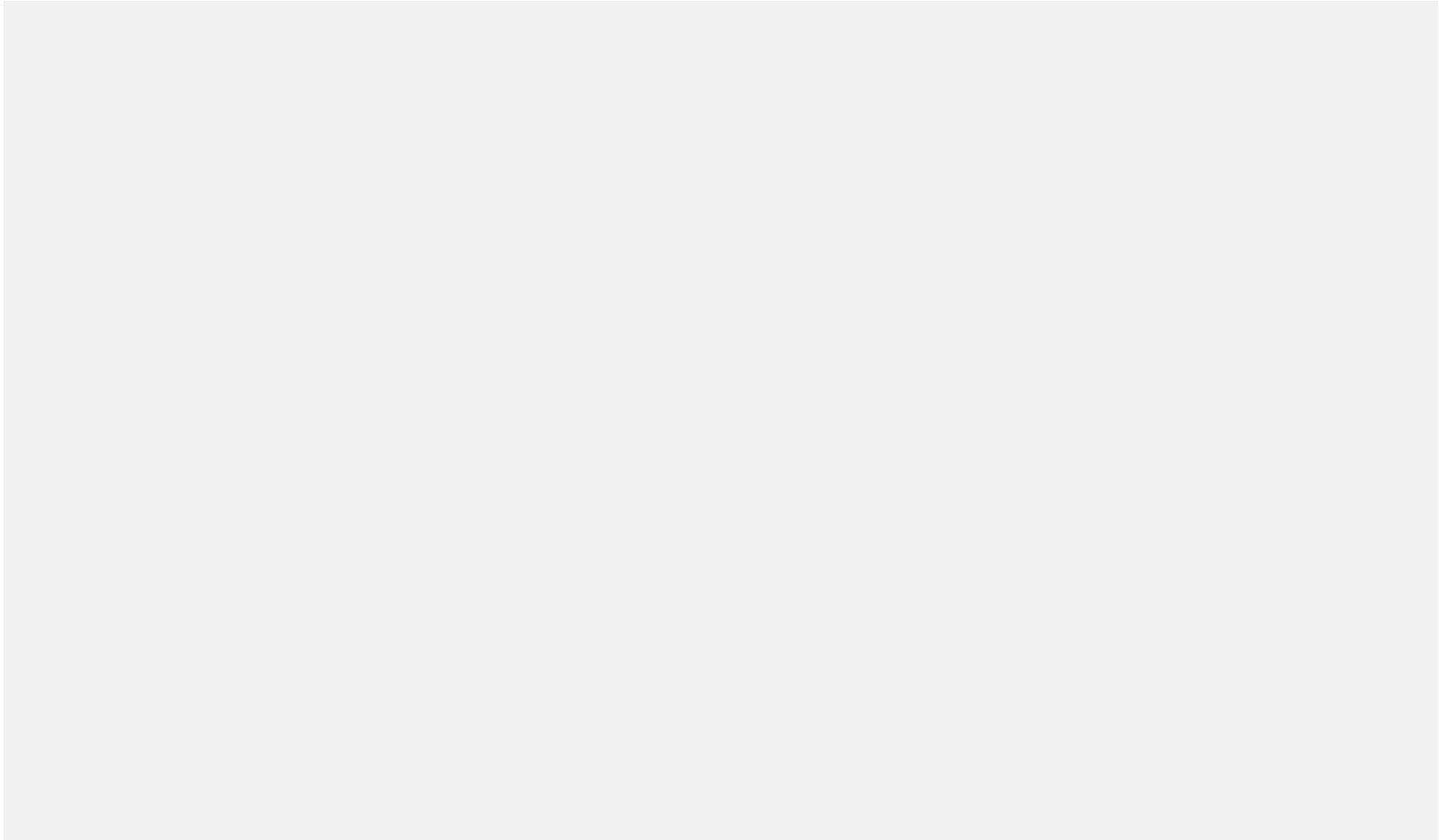


On March 2, 2013, six people were killed when a truck slammed into a Ford Expedition in Elizabethtown, Ky.
Police photo





**About three months later, a massive explosion and fire injured five after a Mack truck and freight train collided in Maryland.
Patrick Semansky/Associated Press**





Two weeks after the Maryland crash, a truck struck vehicles in Murfreesboro, Tenn., killing a couple.
Tennessee State Police

Horrified, NTSB officials once again called for the federal trucking agency to require testing and auditing of companies before they start operations. Ten years earlier, the FMCSA had started a screening program for new companies, but the barriers to get on the road remained low.

But, in January 2019, the FMCSA concluded that the NTSB's recommendation wouldn't significantly boost safety and would

cost too much to implement. So they asked NTSB to drop the issue.

“We are disappointed,” replied the NTSB in a statement that included a litany of crashes that might have been avoided.

Sixteen years of deaths, and still the FMCSA would not budge.

That’s the way the story goes at the FMCSA. Even when change does come, it can take years. Two significant regulations have been in the works for almost 20 years. Since the election of President Trump, moreover, the agency has been more inclined to eliminate regulations rather than add them.



Trucks were pulled off Interstate 95 in Rowley and evaluated. Not all trucks are weighed or inspected. Experience guides the troopers as they decide which trucks are likely to be overweight or need a safety check.

Lane Turner/Globe Staff

“There’s more of a trend right now to take away regulations,” said Robert Molloy, director of the NTSB Office of Highway Safety. “That limits the ability to make sure everyone is operating in a safe environment.”

But even in one case where seemingly everyone agrees change is needed, regulators remain stalled: drug testing. The industry and safety advocates alike say the current testing system is inadequate, failing to screen at all for such drugs as synthetic cannabinoids. And regulators rely on urinalysis rather than hair samples, which means they capture use in recent days, not months.

Last year, the Trucking Alliance, an organization made up of some of the biggest trucking companies, testified before the House of Representatives that its research showed urinalysis was missing 9 out of 10 drug users and estimated that more than 300,000 commercial truck drivers are currently using drugs undetected.



Still, if there was one person that the FMCSA or the state licensing agencies should have stopped, it was Volodymyr Zhukovskyy. But this man was about to demonstrate the lethal consequences of a failed regulatory system.

Zhukovskyy, his family, and his attorneys declined repeated requests for comment for this story.

Zhukovskyy had been a menace behind the wheel since before he even got his learner’s permit, driving drunk, and crashing again and again. His license had been suspended seven times in three-and-a-half years by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and he had crashed his car four times. He’d picked up charges for speeding, driving with a suspended license, lying to police about driving with a fake license, and possessing cocaine and heroin.

That didn’t stop Massachusetts from granting him a commercial driver’s license in August 2018, which allowed him to drive the heaviest trucks on the road. And the arrests and alleged drug use didn’t stop once he was working as a trucker. In February of 2019, he was arrested at a Denny’s restaurant in Baytown, Texas, in the middle of the night, revved up and squirming. He had a crack pipe in his pocket, and his truck was parked outside.

In May 2019, Zhukovskyy allegedly snorted three bags of heroin and overdosed in a parking lot. It took three doses of Narcan

to revive him. Six days later, police in East Windsor, Conn., said they found him hopped up and leaping around a rented Nissan in the parking lot of a Walmart. They guessed he was on methamphetamine and arrested him. At the station, Zhukovskyy



“My life is over,” he wailed again and again. “I don’t want to live anymore.”
But lives other than his were in jeopardy. Zhukovskyy was soon back on the road.

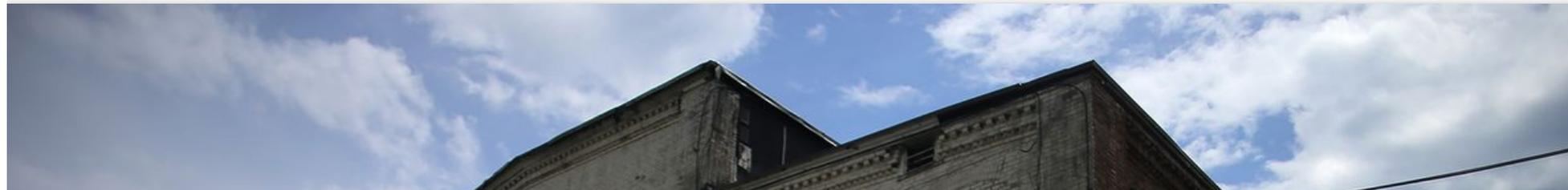
Because the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles failed to process two violation notifications from motor vehicle authorities in Connecticut, Zhukovskyy's license suspension, which should have gone into effect June 10, was never enacted, and he was free to drive without consequence. A national database that tracks commercial drivers was no help. **When Zhukovskyy turned an 18-wheeler over on a stretch of dark Texas highway three weeks later on June 3, somehow emerging unharmed, the only response by police was to take him to a local motel.**

An FMCSA spokesman declined to comment on the Zhukovskyy case because it is under investigation but noted that the agency is not responsible for issuing the licenses of individual commercial drivers. That's the state's job. So when the system in Massachusetts broke down, there was no fallback.

When Zhukovskyy turned an 18-wheeler over on a stretch of dark Texas highway on June 3, somehow emerging unharmed, the only response by police was to take him to a local motel.

Zhukovskyy lost his job with the company whose truck he wrecked in Texas. It took him just a few weeks to find another that would take him on.

The gravel lot where Westfield Transport Inc. kept its trucks was about a mile from the house in West Springfield house where Zhukovskyy lived with his parents. The company was operated by the Gasanov brothers, 35-year-old Dartanyan and 36-year-old Dunyadar. They didn't fret over whether their drivers had clean records — not that June when Zhukovskyy showed up and not years earlier, when Westfield Transport was not a trucking company but a dubious for-hire livery service on its way to amassing more than 1,300 user complaints over four years for unsafe conditions and no-show drivers.





The gravel lot where Westfield Transport had parked their fleet is now largely abandoned.
Lane Turner/Globe Staff

The Gasanovs declined repeated requests for comment for this story and did not respond to a list of detailed questions. In civil court documents, they have said that the Massachusetts RMV told them Zhukovskyy had a valid license. In Westfield Transport's early days, the drivers piloted Toyota Priuses, not Dodge trucks, and, under a state contract, ferried Medicaid patients to methadone clinics and doctor appointments. It did not go well. One driver hit a tree. Another hit a wheelchair van. A third hit a pedestrian. They hit other cars, too, and the infractions piled up, for everything from driving

without a license to vaping THC behind the wheel. Finally, after discovering in early 2016 that the Gasanovs continued to employ three drivers the state had specifically barred, the state revoked their contract. It wasn't much of a setback for the Gasanovs, who simply converted their business from a livery service into a federally regulated trucking company. They quickly won FMCSA approval and relaunched that summer under the same name. It didn't matter that the + **Gasanov brothers** had checkered driving records themselves; Dartanyan's passenger vehicle license had been suspended twice, and Dunyadar's license had been suspended 10 times, including for drunken driving.



Dunyadar Gasanov was interviewed outside his home after the crash involving Westfield Transit driver Volodymyr Zhukovskyy claimed the lives of seven people on motorcycles.
NBC10 Boston

And it didn't matter much whom they hired. Westfield Transport was running "medium-duty" trucks, lighter than 26,001 pounds, and didn't haul hazardous materials, meaning their drivers weren't required to hold commercial licenses. Companies like Westfield don't need to test their drivers for drugs, either, and their drivers' names are not entered into the federal database with commercially licensed drivers. In fact, 800,000 people drive medium-duty trucks across state lines and the federal government isn't even asking their names.

The Gasanovs' business now was hauling cars, transporting them on long trailers between dealerships and auctions across the country.

They ran a frenetic operation, relentlessly focused on making money, said + **Andy Dominguez**, a 43-year-old who lives in Springfield, the first driver they hired. Dominguez had worked for the brothers when they ran the livery service, too — he was one of the three drivers the state barred. "When it comes to running their business," he said, "they're just cheap."

He said Dunyadar would call him while he was on the road and shout at him to drive faster. When equipment broke down, as it seemed constantly to do, Dartanyan fixed the trailers himself, Dominguez said.

"All they need is duct tape, Gorilla Glue, and a rope, and they'll fix anything," he said.





Westfield Transport's use of "medium-duty" trucks, lighter than 26,001 pounds, to carry nonhazardous loads meant their drivers were not required to hold commercial licenses.
John Tlumacki/Globe Staff

In March of 2018, a Vermont inspector checking Dominguez's vehicle at a weigh station found that its brakes were shot and that he had marijuana with him (though Dominguez has a medical marijuana card). The inspector "red flagged" the truck, declaring it unfit to drive. Dominguez said he called Dunyadar Gasanov, who told him to wait until the trooper left and start driving again.

He was somewhere in Pennsylvania when he looked out his window and saw one of his trailer's tires bouncing down the road. He pulled over and called Gasanov again. This time, Dominguez said, Gasanov told him he was on his own and hung up. Dominguez strapped the tire back onto his trailer and headed back to Springfield, where a state trooper stopped him for speeding, cited him for the brakes and marijuana, and again red-flagged the vehicle. Dominguez, disgusted, took his things out of the truck and went home. He was done with Westfield.

"I just felt like I was gonna hurt somebody, or somebody was gonna hurt me," he said.

That was fine with the Gasanovs. They had plenty of other drivers.

There was Dzhamal Ragibov, an Ohio trucker who had lost his license repeatedly for reckless driving and refusing or failing

breath tests.

There was Nadjib Osmanli, of West Springfield, who had had his license suspended and who ran his own trucking company until the FMCSA revoked his operating authority in 2018.

And there was Oleg Kostyushko, a 32-year-old with a history of heroin use who had been in trouble on and off the road, picking up charges for drugs, assaults, and speeding in six states. He had settled two lawsuits for injuring people: one in 2014 in California, where he crashed his rig into a car and fled, and another in 2016 in Arizona, where his truck forced a Ford Focus into a concrete barrier.





Logos of Westfield Transport were barely visible on its trucks parked in an obscure dirt lot off Western Avenue in West Springfield last year.
John Tlumacki/Globe Staff

The Gasanovs and their fleet of troubled drivers accumulated more than 60 violations during the time Westfield was a trucking company, and trucks and drivers — including Dartanyan and Duniyadar themselves — were taken out of service for serious safety violations 26 times. There were no crashes on their record, but still, problems piled up. The FMCSA not only failed to take any meaningful action against the company, it granted Dartanyan the authority in 2018 to open a second trucking business.

By the time Zhukovskyy climbed into the cab of a Westfield Transport Dodge Ram in late June, headed west from a stop at a dealership in New Hampshire, it was clear that no one cared to stop him.



It was just before 6:30 p.m. on June 21, 2019, the first day of summer, when Zhukovskyy pulled a gooseneck trailer through the White Mountains of New Hampshire, kicking up dirt behind him every time he veered out onto the soft shoulder. Other cars, wary of his velocity, gave him space. The highway snaked upwards. He weaved back and forth.

Up ahead, out of view over the crest of a hill, 21 members and friends of the Jarheads Motorcycle Club rode toward him in formation.

At the top of the hill, it would be all over. Zhukovskyy in his Westfield truck would hurtle across the center line and into the bikers, throwing them skyward or pulling them under, in a blast of metal, glass, and flame. Even the trees around them would burn.





Manny Ribeiro, president of Jarheads MC, embraced Jarheads member Aaron Anderson on Oct. 19 at the crash site where four months earlier seven people on motorcycles were killed.
Erin Clark for The Boston Globe

Seven people would die and three would be injured. Zhukovskyy, his blood coursing with heroin and cocaine, according to police, would be allowed to go home for three days before police came to arrest him on seven counts of negligent homicide. They found him sleeping in his parents' house next to 27 empty bags of heroin and fentanyl marked "Superman." Zhukovskyy would argue in court paperwork that an accident reconstruction showed the crash was caused by the lead

motorcyclist, whose autopsy found he was intoxicated. Soon after the crash, the Gasanovs would close down Westfield Transport Inc. Scandal would engulf the Massachusetts RMV. The Department of Transportation would announce an audit of the FMCSA.

But for one last moment on June 21, the horizon was clear. There was nothing but the breeze and the sunlight falling on Mount Jefferson.

Zhukovskyy leaned forward in the cab of his truck, reaching for a drink. Witnesses said he never even hit the brakes.

Contact investigations@globe.com

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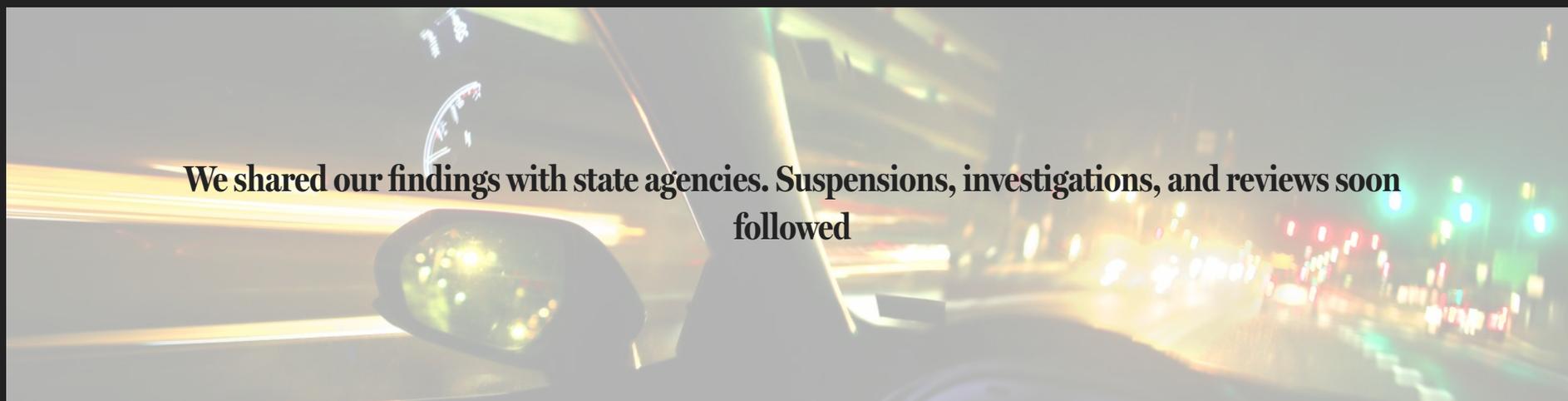
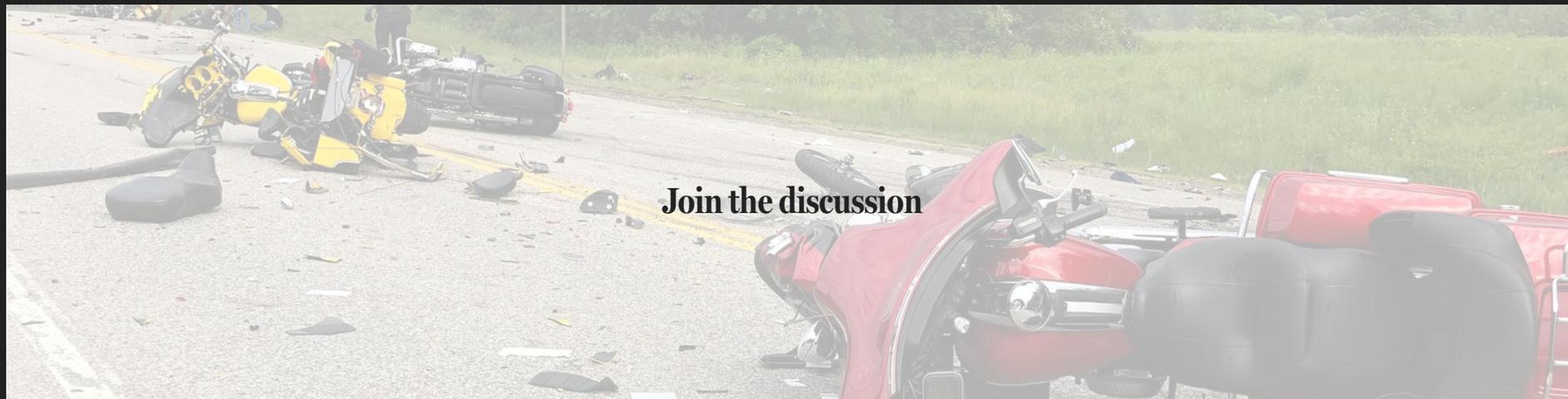
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