

NEWS RELEASE

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CONTACT:

Chris Bortz
KDOT Bureau of Traffic Safety
785-296-3756

Neal Thurman
Corporate Communications Group Inc.
913-451-2990 or 800-726-2990

Seatbelt Survivor Highlights KDOT's 'Click it. Or ticket.' Event
Enforcement mobilization buckles down on those not buckled up

WICHITA, Kan. — When the driver made the illegal left turn in front of her, initiating the crash that came within a hair of killing her, Brenda Dietzman was driving down a well-lit stretch of South Broadway near downtown Wichita...in a fully marked patrol car.

The impact propelled her Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office patrol car through a telephone pole. The car then rolled two and a half times and slid on its roof, traveling two-thirds the length of a football field before it hit a pile of railroad ties and came to a stop. Dietzman suffered a hairline fracture of the C2 vertebra, which protects an area at the top of the spinal cord that controls heartbeat and breathing. The entire back seat of the car was ejected from the car as it rolled; if not for her seatbelt, she surely would have been ejected and killed as well.

Dietzman's message: If another driver can make such a dangerous mistake in front of a marked patrol car, then a similar crash can certainly happen to anyone.

Dietzman, now a sergeant for the sheriff's office, brought her message of seatbelt survival to a special informational event Thursday at Wichita Police Headquarters.

Other officials who spoke at the event included:

- Pete Bodyk, Chief of the KDOT Bureau of Traffic Safety
- Jim Green, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Assistant Regional Administrator
- Col. Terry Maple, Kansas Highway Patrol Superintendent
- Robert Lee, Wichita Police Deputy Chief

The event was part of the national "Click it. Or ticket." safety campaign and enforcement mobilization for seat belt laws. This year's campaign is placing a special emphasis on nighttime seat belt use and enforcement. Nationwide, more than 15,000 passenger vehicle occupants died in traffic crashes between the hours of 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. in 2006, according to NHTSA. Additionally, 64 percent of those passenger vehicle occupants killed were not wearing their seat belts at the time of the fatal crash.

Dietzman noted that she was speaking during National Law Enforcement Memorial Week, when law enforcement agencies honor officers killed in the line of duty. All of the officers at the event were wearing black bands over their badges in honor of their fallen fellow officers. "If I had not been wearing my seat belt (in the crash), my name would have been on that list of fallen officers that was called last Tuesday night," she said.

Bodyk cited the progress made in Kansas over the past several years, in which seat belt usage has increased steadily. But Kansas still lags behind most other states.

"In Kansas, we increased our usage up to 75 percent last year," Bodyk said. "But even with moving up two percentage points over the year before, we're still 44th in the nation on seat belt use, and that's just not acceptable."

NHTSA's Green, representing the federal point of view, noted that "despite outstanding efforts to date from Kansas law enforcement and the entire highway safety community, the state still lags about seven percentage points below the national average.

"We are encouraged you are targeting high-risk drivers and rural drivers" as part of the state's Click It or Ticket program, Green added. "Crashes are the leading cause of death for young people in America and they are especially vulnerable at night. We need to make them understand that seat belt use is the best way for them to stay alive. Kansas would save many lives if it passed a primary seat belt law, while gaining an additional \$11 million in federal transportation funding."

The Highway Patrol's Maple stressed the enforcement component of Click It or Ticket.

"We have roughly 150 law enforcement agencies that will be participating with us statewide," Maple said. "Tickets are part of the Click It or Ticket program. Our troopers are going to be out there actively enforcing, and that means writing tickets.

"We are in a particularly dangerous time right now for young people with prom and graduation," Maple said. The patrol is sending officers to speak at high schools across the state on the topic, reminding them that teens can be ticketed for failing to wear a seat belt, even in the absence of any other violation. "Unfortunately, we lose young people in Kansas every year during prom and graduation season."

His enforcement message was echoed by Wichita's Lee: "In Wichita, as long as drivers and passengers do not click it, they will indeed get a ticket."

KDOT is joining with state and local law enforcement and highway safety officials from May 19 through June 1 to launch an aggressive national "Click it. Or ticket." seat belt enforcement mobilization to crack down on low seat belt use and to reduce highway fatalities.

Bodyk said regular seat belt use is the single most effective way to protect people and reduce fatalities in motor vehicle crashes. In 2006, in Kansas, 60 percent of all traffic fatalities were not wearing their seatbelts. When worn correctly, he added, seat belts have been proven to reduce the risk of serious injury and death.

Yet, nearly one in five Americans (18 percent nationally) still fail to wear a seat belt regularly when driving or riding in a motor vehicle, according to NHTSA's observational seat belt studies.

In Kansas, the adult seat belt usage has continued to increase, from 69 percent in 2005 to 73 percent in 2006 and to 75 percent in 2007. However, this is still well below the national usage rate of 82 percent.

Stepped-up law enforcement activities will be conducted during the national “Click It. Or ticket.” enforcement mobilization. The mobilization is being supported by a projected \$7.5 million in paid national advertising and additional state advertising to encourage all motorists, especially motorists at night, to always buckle up.

“Seat belts clearly save lives,” Bodyk said. “Unfortunately, too many people still need a reminder, so local and state law enforcement officers will be out in force buckling down on those who are not buckled up. Wearing your seat belt costs you nothing, but not wearing it could. Unless you want to risk a ticket, or worse – your life; please remember to buckle up, day *and* night. In Kansas, it’s Click It. Or ticket.”

For more information, please visit <http://www.ksdot.org/burTrafficSaf/default.asp> or www.nhtsa.gov.

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