



Bureau of Transportation Safety
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Topeka, KS 66603-3754

NEWS RELEASE

Kansas Department of Transportation News Release

September 27, 2010

10-094

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Kansas Program Honored with National Highway Safety Award

Crawford County recognized for innovative teen seatbelt enforcement program.

KANSAS CITY – Ask Crawford County Sheriff Sandy Horton what the worst part of his job is, and he will tell you, “notifying a family that they’ve lost a loved one in a crash.” Ask Sheriff Horton what the best part of his job has been lately, and he’ll say, “Arriving at a crash scene, and finding no serious injuries or deaths because everyone was buckled up.”

The Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) presented its highway safety awards during the GHSA Annual Meeting in Kansas City today. Kansas was one of four states presented with the Peter K. O’Rourke Special Achievement Awards for notable achievements in highway safety in 2009.

What started as a conversation with Dave Corp, Law Enforcement Liaison for KDOT’S Traffic Safety Section, regarding Crawford County’s low seatbelt usage rate, has turned into a teen initiative credited with saving many lives. When Corp approached Horton about the problem in 2008, the sheriff had a hard time believing him. However, when he did some observations of his own, Horton said the KDOT numbers actually looked generous.

After meeting with Captain Rick Wilson and Trooper John Keene of the Kansas Highway Patrol, they decided to approach other law enforcement agencies and school officials to resolve the

issue. Soon joining them was a group of 30 teens, representing every high school in the county, who formulated a program designed to increase seatbelt use through education, incentives, and enforcement. Named by the students, S.A.F.E. (Seatbelts Are For Everyone) is a student-driven, community-supported, law enforcement-involved program which has spurred interest among other Kansas counties and other states.

This wasn't the first attempt by officials at increasing seatbelt compliance. When the primary seatbelt law for teens went into effect in January, 2008, law enforcement officers went to the schools, warning teens about the dangers of non-use. The response was lackluster; Horton said they spent more time picking up the brochures off the ground than anything. The week after they'd warned the teens, they patrolled the areas around schools, and wrote 292 seatbelt violation tickets. "The results were clear, until we had the students involved in leading the program, our efforts were not going to be effective" said Horton.

With S.A.F.E., however, things changed dramatically. They started with unpublicized observational surveys done by trained students, followed by no-nonsense talks at the schools regarding the number of teens killed and seriously injured every year...and how 95% of those teens killed were not buckled. The KHP brought in the "convincer" to let the students and staff members take a turn at a simulated 5 mph crash. At the end of each monthly assembly, students were encouraged to sign cards (also student-designed) pledging to wear their seatbelts. Names from those who pledged were then used to draw for \$25 VISA cards, provided by local and state sponsors. Additionally, the students understood there would be no tolerance from law enforcement, and that citations would be given. Finally, a third set of observational surveys were done, and grand prizes were awarded to students whose names were drawn from the school showing the highest overall usage rate and the one with the highest increase in usage.

The results? In the first year of S.A.F.E., there were only 64 citations written, and that number shrank to 25 in 2010. Though not 100% as we would like, the child seatbelt usage rate has jumped from 54% to 77%, and the adult rate has increased to 72%. Not only are the teens buckling up, they are passing the message on to their parents and siblings that seatbelts save lives.

Even more importantly, during the months of May, June, and July, there were eight rollover crashes involving teens as drivers or passengers in Crawford County. Because 100% of the occupants were buckled, none were ejected, and only three received minor injuries. That's the life-saving result Sheriff Horton and others were hoping for.

For more information about S.A.F.E. go to: <http://www.ktsro.org/safe.html>

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