Child Passenger Safety Week focuses on education, awareness

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and injury for children, and a childâ€™s risk of injury greatly increases if they are not appropriately restrained. To help reduce these risks, safety advocates around the state will be educating parents and caregivers about the proper use of vehicle safety restraints during National Child Passenger Safety Week, Feb. 11 to 17. â€œThe goal is simple -â€“ to save lives and reduce injuries by teaching people how to properly use child seats, booster seats and seat belts,â€• said Carla Levinski, Occupant Protection Program manager at the Oregon Department of Transportationâ€™s Safety Division. â€œDuring 2006 in Oregon, 1,354 child passengers under age eight were injured and six were killed in motor vehicle crashes. Two out of five of these children were not using child restraints. This means they were either using ill-fitting adult lap and shoulder belt systems or no restraints at all.â€• (See county-by-county breakdown for more information.) Under Oregon law, drivers are responsible for wearing safety belts and for ensuring that all passengers under age 16 are appropriately restrained. The law requires that children under age four and weighing less than 40 pounds ride in a child safety seat. Children over four years of age or weighing more than 40 pounds must ride in a booster seat until they reach both age six and weigh at least 60 pounds. Passengers over age 16 are themselves responsible for wearing a safety belt. Also under Oregon law, minors under age 18 are prohibited from riding in the open bed of a pickup truck. An additional two-week statewide â€œThree Flagsâ€• campaign, Feb. 5 to 18, will focus on reducing crash deaths and injuries through enforcement of Oregonâ€™s child seat laws. ODOT provides federal overtime funding to Oregon law enforcement agencies throughout the year to monitor compliance, specifically with safety belt, DUII and speed control regulations. These three factors are the leading causes of Oregonâ€™s crash deaths and injuries. Forty percent of Oregonâ€™s 2005 traffic fatalities were reportedly unrestrained. If all adults and children had been properly restrained, ODOT estimates approximately 100 lives may have been saved that year. â€œAdult safety belts are anchored too widely to securely hold a child in place,â€• said Levinski. â€œAccording to the latest U.S. DOT recommendations, child passengers arenâ€™t safe in adult seat belts until they are at least 4 feet, 9 inches tall. Instead, children must â€˜graduateâ€™ through a series of specially designed vehicle restraints in order to ride safely in motor vehicles.â€• Throughout National Child Passenger Safety Week, public health officials, medical professionals, injury-prevention specialists and others will be conducting special activities that promote the correct use of child safety seats, booster seats, and safety belts for children. Oregon has over four hundred certified child seat technicians who last year inspected 2,580 child and boosters seats; they found 82% were incorrectly used or installed. Using the right child restraint can reduce the chance of crash injury an estimated 71% for infants, 54% for toddlers, and 59% for children in boosters. While any restraint is better than none at all, only 52 percent of Oregon children four to six years old or weighing 40 to 60 pounds are using booster seats, according to a 2006 ODOT observational study. Use of a booster seat reduces the risk of crash injury 59 percent compared to safety belts alone, according to research by the Childrenâ€™s Hospital of Philadelphia. And children under twelve years old are 37% safer riding in rear seats as opposed to the front seat. ODOTâ€™s Transportation Safety Division partners with ACTS Oregon Child Safety Seat Resource Center to deliver public education aimed at keeping children safer in cars. People who want assistance with selecting or installing an appropriate car seat should contact ACTS at (800) 772-1315 or, in the Portland metro area, (503) 643-5620. For schedules and information about free year-round child safety seat inspections, visit www.childsafetyseat.org. ODOT offers a variety of free brochures, posters and other educational materials by calling (503) 986-3883 or (800) 922-2022. Videos and Vince & Larry costumes are also available for loan from the ODOT Library by calling (503) 986-3276. For other questions, contact Carla Levinski, ODOTâ€™s Occupant Protection Program manager, at (800) 922-2022 or (503) 986-4199.