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By RACHEL COLEMAN

Leader & Times

Since 1981, Kansas law has required adult drivers to secure children in safety seats. But if the child or infant seat used is out of date or improperly installed, young passengers may still be at risk for death or injury.

That's why various nonprofit agencies sponsor workshops to train volunteers about the fine points of child safety seat installation. The next such event in Southwest Kansas is scheduled for April 23-26 in Garden City.

Arturo and Dora Ponce, community developers who work at Mexican-American Ministries in Liberal, hope to see a good turnout at the training. So does Tina Ortiz, who works at the Seward County Health Department's "Healthy Start" program for parents of young children.

"We need more child passenger safety technicians," said Ortiz. "We need to get people educated about how to buckle up those babies."

Too often, she said, agencies sponsor the purchase or distribution of infant and child seats without providing adequate training about how to use the seat effectively.

“You can’t just give them out,” she said. “You have to educate that parent.”

If more people in the community would complete the Child Passenger Safety Technician courses, conducted with the oversight of the Kansas Highway Patrol, the problem could be solved, Ortiz said.

Certification costs \$75, which might deter some would-be volunteers. However, organizations like MAM and Healthy Start are prepared to cover the expense, along with mileage, for people who want to earn the certification.

Dora Ponce is passionate about the initiative.

“This program has come too late for too many people,” she said. “Nine years ago, a baby six months old was in a bad car wreck with his family, and we still see the results of that accident.”

Though the child was restrained in an infant seat, Ponce said, the seat itself was not properly installed in the car.

“He went flying through the windshield,” she said. “It was a miracle he lived.”

Miracle notwithstanding, the boy suffered multiple skull fractures which left him disabled and prone to illness.

“We were uncertain what kind of life he would have,” Ponce said. Nine years later, “we still are. Every day, it’s worse for this boy.”

Ponce pointed out that such stories, though tragic, will not change a thing unless those who hear them are willing to take action.

“If you feel so sad about this child, then think about what could have made a difference,” she said. “If that training had come nine years ago, this would not have happened. We need to take these issues seriously.”

Community Response Committee chair Jack Cooley agrees.

“He’s a sweet kid, and it’s a shame this happened,” he said. “It would be great to see some good come out of the tragedy.”

Registration for the upcoming Child Passenger Safety Technician courses is open now. For information about signing up with local agencies, contact Ortiz at the Seward County Health Department, 626-3369, or Ponce at Mexican American Ministries, 624-6865.

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