• Special to the Daily Leader

Beginning May 18 and running through May 31, look for heightened traffic enforcement in Liberal as additional officers will be on the city streets aggressively enforcing Kansas occupant restraint and other traffic laws as the Liberal Police Department participates in the 2009 Kansas Click It or Ticket traffic enforcement campaign.

This activity is supported by a grant from the Kansas Department of Transportation.

Look for strict enforcement of the Safety Belt Use and Child Passenger Safety Acts. Simply put, these acts require that all persons in the front seat must be buckled in and that all persons under the age of 18 must be buckled in regardless of their position in the vehicle.

In the event that a passenger under the age of 14 is unrestrained, the driver will be cited. Wher e a driver or passenger, aged 14 through 17, is seen to be unrestrained, that person will be cited.

Children under the age of 4 must be secured in an approved child safety seat; children ages 4 through 7 must be securely belted into an approved booster seat; and children ages 8 through 13 must be safety-belted.

In addition, the act prohibits persons under the age of 14 from riding in any part of a vehicle not intended for carrying passengers, such as a pickup bed.

Across Kansas, about 135 law enforcement agencies, including the Kansas Highway Patrol, will be participating in Click It or Ticket.

The aim is to drastically reduce the number of preventable deaths and injuries that occur when unbelted drivers and passengers are involved in traffic crashes.

According to KDOT's Traffic Safety section, traffic crashes last year claimed the lives of 384 people. Tragically, of those who died, about

61 percent were not belted in. By contrast, almost 90 percent of those not injured were belted in.

Across the state, only 77 percent of front seat passengers buckle up, ranking Kansas 39th in the nation for seat belt compliance, at well under the national average of 83 percent.

Seat belt compliance rates, by county, range from 56 to 86 percent, with higher rates generally associated with urban populations and lower rates associated with rural counties.

As would be expected, the lower compliance rate in rural areas is matched with a higher crash fatality rate. This is largely due to vehicles in those areas leaving the roadway and colliding with heavy objects or rolling over during which time unbelted occupants become torpedoes and often are ejected.

Excess speed and alcohol are often contributing factors. In Kansas, more than three times the number of crashes occur on city streets as on county roads; yet county roads see 63 percent more fatalities than do city streets. Urban motorists, in particular, are more likely to be belted and less likely to leave the road.

More disheartening to the law enforcement community, however, is the low compliance rate for child restraint. According to the latest child safety restraint survey by KDOT, on average only about 75 percent of Kansas children, of all ages, are buckled in.

Only 66 percent of children, aged 5-13, are buckled in. This stands in stark contrast to the average adult rate of 77 percent which suggests that some parents are buckling themselves in while leaving their children unrestrained.

"Everyone knows there is both a seat belt law and a law directing that children should be properly restrained, and I have to believe that everyone knows it is a smart thing to do," Lt. Dennis Mulanax said. "But too many drivers play the odds, knowing that a crash is unlikely. The fact is, though, crashes do happen – too often – and that 2 seconds to buckle up looks like a good investment when they do. You may be a good driver, but not everyone you share the road with will be. When you don't buckle up or require that your passengers buckle up, you're making the decision for everyone in your vehicle that none of the drivers you meet are going to be dangerously distracted by sleepiness, cell phone, texting, changing radio stations, etc. And you're assuming that no roadway or mechanical problems will cause you to suddenly veer off the road. We want it known that Liberal Police Department is committed to aggressively ticketing violators of Kansas passenger restraint laws and all traffic infractions that make our roadways unsafe."

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