

For immediate release

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WEEKEND DUI CRASHES HIGHLIGHT LITTLE KNOWN RISK TO KIDS

ALTADENA, CA (July 25, 2008) –Two weekend crashes in which one child was killed and another seriously injured have prompted a Los Angeles non-profit to highlight a little-noticed risk to kids—being killed or injured while being driven by a parent or caregiver under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

A five-year-old boy was killed Saturday when the 1998 Acura RS driven by his father hit a pole and overturned at 90th Street and Avenue N in Palmdale. The child’s mother and one-year-old sister, who were also in the car, sustained minor to moderate injuries. The father has been booked on suspicion of drunk driving. On Sunday, a three-year-old Modesto girl was seriously hurt after being ejected from a car driven by her mother. A male passenger was also seriously injured. Her mother, who was unhurt, was booked on suspicion of felony DUI, felony child endangerment and driving on a suspended license and remains in the Merced County Jail.

The scenario is all too familiar to Stephanie Tombrello, Executive Director of SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. According to Tombrello, “Almost 400 kids die on our roads each year in DUI-involved crashes, and many more are injured. 25% of the crashes that kill kids involve alcohol. Many of these kids aren’t placed at risk by a stranger but by the person driving **their** vehicle.”

The tragedy makes Tombrello angry. “These children had no say about whether or not they got in the car with an impaired driver. Too many kids are killed or injured by the actions of people who are supposed to protect them. Most of these deaths and injuries are preventable. In most DUI crashes involving a child fatality, the drunk driver survives. Unfortunately, kids are

especially vulnerable because DUI drivers frequently do not take the time to ensure that the children in their care are properly buckled up.”

Figures from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show that alcohol-related traffic fatalities are at their highest rate for ten years. The majority of children killed in DUI crashes—68% in recent years—are riding with the DUI driver.

SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. is campaigning to reduce the number of children involved in DUI-related incidents, supported by a grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety, through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. recommends that:

- Enhanced penalties be faced by DUI drivers who drive with children in the car.
- Child endangerment charges be brought against parents who allow their kids to be driven by a DUI driver.
- The media highlight this little-known risk to children, so that parents, policy makers, and enforcement agencies are made more aware of the serious risk of impaired driving to kids.
- Civil courts ensure that children are not put at risk by DUI parents through court-mandated visitation rights; and driving with children while impaired be clearly stated as a consideration in custody or visitation decisions.
- Criminal courts address the issue of impaired driving with children in the car when sentencing DUI drivers.
- Parents educate themselves and their children about how they can protect themselves from impaired drivers. Teach children to buckle themselves up and be good role models by wearing their own safety belts so they are less likely to be injured if they are involved in a DUI crash. Institute a ‘no-questions asked’ ride home policy with teens so that they can get your help if they are put at risk by an impaired driver.

The unequivocal message from Tombrello: “Driving while under the influence with a child in the car, or allowing your child to be driven by an impaired driver, is child abuse. We should treat it as such.”