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SPATE OF DUI CRASHES KILL, HURT KIDS: SAFETY ADVOCATES ALERT PARENTS

TORRANCE, CA (August 2, 2010) – Three separate crashes involving DUI drivers have killed two and injured two children in their care in California this week.

A four-year-old Cutler boy died from injuries received in a crash that police have blamed on his drunken driver. Angel Lopez was killed when the Toyota in which he was traveling slowed but failed to stop at an intersection and was hit by a Dodge pickup truck. Angel succumbed to his injuries at Community Regional Medical Center in Fresno. The driver of the Toyota, Rodolfo Rangle of Cutler, was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence. The relationship between Angel and Rangle has not been reported by CHP. Another child passenger in the Dodge, along with two adults, was treated for minor injuries

Two Petaluma boys aged 1 and 4 received minor injuries on Saturday July 24 after their father crashed his 1997 Nissan Pathfinder into a truck being driven by a friend with whom he had just been drinking. Both Sonoma County men have been arrested for removing the children from the scene of the crash after trying to cover up the collision and the presence of the children. The children's father, Dustin Whitney, allegedly failed to seek medical attention for the children and refused to help CHP find them. He was booked for DUI causing injury, child endangerment, violation of probation, conspiracy, and driving on a suspended license. He has two prior DUI convictions.

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An eight-year-old Monterey boy paid the ultimate price on Tuesday, July 27 when he was killed following a high-speed pursuit. The car in which he was traveling reached speeds of 120 MPH. Isaiah Solis Becker was fatally injured when his father slammed their Lexus GS 300 into a metal guardrail on southbound Highway 1 at 1 a.m., allegedly while attempting to flee police. Zabdiel Solis Arciga was charged with second-degree vehicular manslaughter, two counts of felony driving under the influence, felony child endangerment, and unlawful flight from a police officer resulting in death. According to court records, Arciga pleaded guilty to drunken driving charges in 2002 and received five years on probation.

The scenario of parents and other adults putting children at risk of DUI crashes is all too familiar to Stephanie Tombrello, Executive Director of SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. “Almost 400 kids die on our roads each year in DUI-involved crashes, and many more are injured. The majority of these kids are placed at risk not by a stranger, but by the person with whom they are riding.”

The trauma suffered by vulnerable children 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 should protect them. These deaths and injuries are entirely preventable. If you are a parent and you have a substance abuse problem, you need to know that you are putting your children at risk. Get treatment — before your child becomes another DUI statistic. If you are the partner of someone with a substance abuse problem, do everything you can to keep children from getting in the car with that person. Angel and Isaiah have paid the ultimate price because the adults who were supposed to protect them failed them to do so.”

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Supported by a grant from the California Office of Traffic Safety, through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, SafetyBeltSafe U.S.A. is campaigning to reduce the number of children killed or injured in DUI-related incidents by making parents, policy makers, and enforcement agencies aware that impaired drivers are especially dangerous when driving with children. 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, policymakers, substance abuse counselors, and enforcement agencies are made more aware of the severity of the risk of impaired driving to children.
- Civil courts ensure that children are not put at risk by DUI parents through court-mandated visitation rights. Driving with children while impaired should be stated explicitly 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. Parents can teach their children to buckle 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.

Tombrello’s message is unequivocal. “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.”

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