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LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

By State Representative Ron Crimm

Keeping kids safe: Car heat-related deaths on rise

Summertime has become synonymous with pool parties, cookouts and vacations. In recent years, however, it has unfortunately also become the time when media outlets report of heartbreaking and preventable deaths that occur when children are left unattended in hot cars.

Last year's car heat-related deaths reached an all-time high with 49 child fatalities, three of which were in Kentucky. Over the past seven years, our Commonwealth has lost 13 children in hot cars, with at least one death occurring every year. This trend appears to be continuing, as seven children across the nation have already died this year in hot cars, including the earliest ever reported death in Kentucky. In the past decade alone, nearly 500 children have died after being left unattended in hot cars.

Any vehicle parked in sunlight will experience a dramatic increase in temperature. When the outside temperature reaches 93 degrees, the temperature inside a vehicle, even with the window partially rolled down, can reach 125 degrees in 20 minutes. In 40 minutes, the temperature inside a vehicle can climb to 140 degrees. The facts are even more bothersome for a vehicle parked in direct sunlight, as the temperature can range anywhere from 131-172 degrees in as little as fifteen minutes. In such an environment, it would take only minutes for a child to die or sustain serious injuries.

Many question how someone could leave a child in a sweltering hot car. Some parents or caregivers may choose not to take their child in and out of their car seat for what they think will be a quick stop at the supermarket. Others may forget their sleeping child is in the back seat of the car. It is not unheard of for children to accidentally lock themselves in a car while playing hide and seek.

In the face of such sobering facts, you may be curious as to what can be done to help end these accidents. Several groups have called upon Congress, urging them to require vehicle safety features, such as sensors that detect the weight of a child left in the car after someone has exited and locked the vehicle. Congress has yet to act on legislation addressing this issue, but here are some tips to aid in avoiding this preventable tragedy:

- Never leave a child alone inside a car even if the air-conditioning is on or a window is cracked.
- Make it a habit to open the back door and look in the backseat of your vehicle before locking the doors and walking away.
- Lock all car doors and trunk hatches, especially at home, and keep all sets of keys out of a child's reach.
- Have a visual cue. Place a stuffed animal in the car seat when it's empty, but move it up front when your child is with you.
- Make it routine to place whatever is to be carried from the car, like a cell phone or briefcase, on the floor in front of a child in a backseat, triggering you to see a child when the back door is opened.
- Arrange to have your daycare provider call you if your child has not been dropped off within thirty minutes of your usual routine.

If you see a child alone in a vehicle, check to see if there are signs of heat-related sickness and, if so, get the child out as quickly as possible. Then call 911 immediately.

Safe Kids USA established a hyperthermia-prevention initiative in 2010 and, in May, Kentucky launched the program, "Never Leave Your Child Alone in a Car." This initiative emphasizes awareness of this issue and encourages citizen involvement to protect our children from being placed in harm's way.

For more information on keeping children safe from car heat-related injuries, you may visit www.safekids.org or contact your local health department.

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