

Back-over deaths devastate families

Mandatory cameras are again deferred

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“Tragic accident.”

It’s the description given, over and over again, as four U.S. families every week bury a loved one — often a child — who was backed over and killed. It’s one that Tiffany Schmidt, 31, heard when her 2-year-old son, Wesley, was backed over by his father in Clarksville, Tenn., in 2006.

“It devastates a family when it happens,” Schmidt said. “You think you’re untouchable and you’re not. All it took was a second for me to lose a child.”

Two weeks ago, Mayor Karl Dean’s 2-year-old niece, Dugan Davis, was killed under such circumstances when she rode her scooter behind her father’s SUV and was backed over.

“There has been nothing through today to suggest that this was anything but a tragic accident,” said Metro police spokesman Don Aaron.

Schmidt and safety advocates say such tragedies can largely be prevented by imposing new car safety rules that were expected to be put in place this week. Those rules would have mandated that every new car and truck under 10,000 pounds built after September 2014 include a rear-view camera system. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates those changes would save 95 to 112 lives every year and prevent more than 7,000 injuries.

But the agency, when faced with a Feb. 29 deadline to come up with new rules, deferred.

“While the Department has made progress toward a final rule to improve rearward visibility, it has decided that further study and data analysis — including of a wider range of vehicles and drivers — is important to ensure the most protective and efficient rule possible,” the agency said in a statement. “The Department remains committed to improving rearview visibility for the nation’s fleet and we expect to complete our work and issue a final rule by December 31, 2012.”

The news shocked and disheartened Janette Fennell, president and founder of the Kansas City-based KidsAndCars.org. Fennell helped get the law passed that is forcing NHTSA to come up with the new rules.

“Delayed again? This is the third delay,” Fennell said. “Not only disappointing, but we already know that at least 11 children have died in back-over accidents this year. And this is just going to continue and continue until somebody does something about it.”

228 deaths a year

In 2008, Congress passed the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act, at the urging of Fennell’s organization. Named for a 2-year-old New York boy who was backed over by his father, a pediatrician, it directed NHTSA to study and create new rules to improve rear-view visibility. The agency found that 228 people are killed every year and 17,000 injured in back-over accidents involving passenger vehicles.

Over the past four years, the agency has investigated how best to improve visibility, concluding that, with current technology, there’s one clear choice: cameras.

Fennell said that vehicles, particularly modern SUVs, have woeful rear visibility. In one experiment, her group was able to fit 62 children behind an SUV without the driver being able to see any of them.

“It’s incredible that for 100 years there has never been rear-view visibility standards,” she said. “The fact that we’ve been backing up blindly is incredible. It has caused numerous deaths.”

At least five of those have happened in the Nashville area over the past 10 years. Two Antioch children — a 2-year-old and an 11-month-old — died after being backed over in 2002 and 2003. In 2008, Maria Chapman, daughter of Christian music star Steven Curtis Chapman, was backed over by her brother in their Franklin driveway as she played. And just two weeks ago, Dean's niece was killed at her Belle Meade home.

Chapman and Dean declined to comment.

And then there was little Wesley, who was riding his tricycle when he was run over by his father's flatbed tow truck.

"Every time I back out of my driveway, I'm constantly thinking I'm going to hit something," Schmidt said. "It's something that I don't ever want another parent to go through."

Cameras sought

Rear-view cameras have grown in popularity with the rise in SUVs. Ben Freeland, owner and general manager of Freeland Chevrolet Superstore in Nashville, said drivers ask specifically for that feature these days. Others are willing to have them installed after purchasing a vehicle.

"Safety is the first thing. You obviously don't want to hurt anyone. And it allows you to maneuver and park in tighter spots," he said. "Most of them are part of the option package. They're becoming more prevalent as the cost becomes less and less."

Criticism has already been leveled that mandating such cameras would raise the cost of new vehicles. NHTSA estimates costs ranging from \$58 per vehicle for ones that already have advanced displays to \$203 for those without.

Nissan said in a statement that all its products starting with the 2013 model year will offer some form of rear monitoring as an option, with such systems standard on Infiniti models. But the company stopped short of endorsing mandatory cameras as a safety feature.

"Nissan believes rear-view cameras are a useful parking aid," the company said. "However, their safety benefits are limited because the environment behind a vehicle can change very quickly and driver attention, awareness of the surroundings, and reaction are significant variables."

Schmidt said any cost is easily justifiable, particularly if it prevents another family the kind of pain hers has endured.

"It is brutal. It has been brutal," she said. "My life has been turned upside down."

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