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Mo-based group launches kids safety program

By **Kim Bell**
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
09/05/2008

A Missouri couple whose son was killed by a runaway van are behind a new nationwide safety campaign to keep kids safe around cars.

The Zero Seconds campaign, launched today, aims to teach parents to never, ever leave a child unattended inside or near a car -- not even for one second. The campaign consists of public service announcements, posters, magnets and fliers to spread the word.

The program uses as its backdrop the deadly incidents that have happened in St. Louis and elsewhere: Children run over by parents backing out of driveways. Tots who overheated and died after being left in hot cars. Kids left in running cars taken by car thieves.

"Many people say that can never happen to me, but what people need to be asking is, 'How can I ensure this won't happen to me?'" said Terrill Struttmann of Villa Ridge, Mo., who is executive director of the nonprofit Harrison's Hope. "This can happen to anyone. When you're dealing with kids in a vehicle, you need to be extra-vigilant."

Struttmann and his wife, Michele, started Harrison's Hope in honor of their son, 2-year-old Harrison Struttmann, who was killed in 1998 when a van ran him over at Rennick Riverfront Park on the Missouri River in Washington, Mo. The van had been left running with two boys -- ages 2 and 3 -- playing inside. The boys managed to slip the van into drive. It hopped a curb and plowed into Harrison and Michele.

The Zero Seconds campaign is an effort to



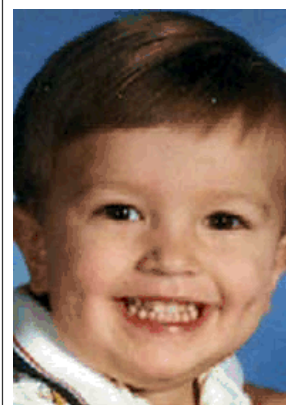
This 2000 photo shows Michele Struttmann in front of the gravesite for her son, Harrison, at St. Francis Borgia Cemetery in Washington, Mo. (P-D)

Year	Incidents	Kids Involved	Fatalities
2008	352	488	72
2007	754	967	188
2006	578	762	133
2005	451	540	158
2004	434	561	122
2003	583	728	143
2002	433	593	116

(as of 7/8/08)

Incidents nationwide of children left unattended in or near vehicles, often with tragic results. Incidents include children found dead in car trunks, being run over by parents, caught in power windows or taken in car thefts.

Source: Harrison's Hope, Washington, Mo.



Harrison Struttmann, killed in 1998

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7. St. Louis woman dies in another fast-food dispute
8. Illinois Ameren customers find savings in fluctuating rate program
9. Pregnancy often puts success out of reach for teens
10. Committees say keep all but 1 judge

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prod parents and babysitters to think about such things. One poster shows a child playing with a car's gear shift: "A car is not a playground," the sign implores. Another poster of an infant left in a hot car says, "It is not worth the risk." Organizers also want to empower kids to speak up, to never let a caregiver leave them alone in or near a car.

- Watch a short "Zero Seconds" video
- A list of recent U.S. deaths involving kids in cars

Next week, the group plans a presentation to about 500 high school girls at Incarnate Word Academy, a Catholic school in Bel-Nor. High schoolers are a perfect audience for the message, Struttman says. Whether they're babysitting or caring for younger siblings, the teens might not be aware of the dangers. The school principal, Randy Berzon-Mikolas, said the tragic stories in the news bring home the point how important it is not to leave a child unattended.

"You just don't know in the minute you're outside your vehicle what can happen," the principal said. "We just need to make our students more aware. We have a lot of students who do babysitting and have siblings and (work as) a nanny in the summer. It will be incredibly beneficial for our students to hear these stories.

"And I suspect if our students were more aware," the principal added, "they could pass along the information to their own parents."

Struttman said there's no central database nationwide that collects statistics on these types of incidents. But his group gathers news stories from around the country. Based on those accounts, Harrison's Hope has documented 352 incidents and 72 deaths involving kids left in or around vehicles this year alone. Since 2002, the group has found more than 900 deaths.

Some of the horrific cases have happened locally. For instance, last summer, a 7-month-old girl died after being left in a sweltering car on the Washington University School of Medicine by her parents. They busy working couple had started a new routine that day and thought the other parent was taking the baby to daycare. A few weeks later, a baby in Bowling Green, Mo., suffered a similar fate. The father of a 4-month-old girl forgot to take her to daycare and left her in a hot car for at least six hours while he was at work.

"Busy parents can get distracted, and it's scary to think that this does happen," Struttman said. "It's not uneducated parents who don't love their children. It's very loving parents this has happened to. We just need to drive home the point that, when it comes to your children and your cars, many children are dying under 100 percent preventable circumstances."

A video by the group asks, "Were you one of the millions of near-misses that happen every year? Or were you one of the tragedies? Unfortunately, it only takes a second for an incident to happen."

The Zero Seconds kit, sold for \$17.25, includes an eight-minute video and information for educators, community leaders, parents, service clubs and the media. The kit includes pledge cards for parents to promise such things as to hold their child's hand in a parking lot and for kids to promise never to play near an unattended vehicle and to speak up if they're ever left alone by a babysitter or other caregiver.

Harrison's Hope, a nonprofit based in Washington, Mo., used to be called Kids in Cars. Terrill Struttman is a former business account executive with Verizon Wireless who left his job in 2001 to start the agency with his wife. They have lobbied for legislation nationally for people to be prosecuted if they knowingly leave a child unattended in a vehicle. When Harrison was killed, only six states had such laws. Now, 14 states have them.



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The Struttmanns have one son, Peyton, who is now 6.

For more information on the program, go to www.zeroseconds.org or www.harrisonshope.org

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erika lyn smith September 5, 2008 11:35AM CST

Michele and Terrill, I keep your beautiful family in my prayers every day. I love the new name- Harrison's Hope! I know Harrison is so proud of the hard work you both are doing everyday. I cannot believe it is over 6 years since Peyton flew down into your arms. Wow! Warm hugs! Erika Lyn Smith (Aka Kim)

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