




MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and Council

FROM: Howard S. Lazarus, P.E., Director
Public Works Department 

CC: Marc A. Ott, City Manager
Robert D. Goode, P.E., Assistant City Manager

DATE: November 7, 2013

SUBJECT: Child Safety Seats (Resolution No. 20121101-063)

In June 2011, Children's Optimal Health released the Transportation Related Child Injury report which was developed in cooperation with Dell Children's Medical Center. The report was developed to help identify areas of concern in the community for child injury (how and where children are injured), and it included analysis of Motor Vehicle Crashes Involving Children and Child Passenger Safety: Restraint Use and Resources.

On April 5, 2012, Council adopted a resolution directing the City Manager to work with experts at Dell Children's Medical Center and Children's Optimal Health, the Texas Department of Transportation and neighborhood associations, community organizations, and residents to develop a comprehensive plan of action to minimize childhood transportation injuries, specifically in the "hotspot" areas identified in the report: the Dove Springs and Rundberg neighborhoods.

In response to this directive, a working group led by the Public Works Department and the Austin Transportation Department was formed. This group, which now meets biannually, consists of representatives from Children's Optimal Health, Dell Children's Medical Center, COA Public Works Department, Austin Police Department, Emergency Medical Services, COA Transportation Department, Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department, Austin Fire Department, the City Manager's Office, and Texas Department of Transportation. Five subgroups, which meet quarterly, emerged to focus on specific topics: Enforcement, Education & Community Outreach, Policy, Engineering & Built Environment, and Data Collection, Use, & Sharing.

Represented in the Enforcement Subgroup were Austin Police Department, Public Works Department, Emergency Medical Services, Dell Children's Medical Center, and Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department. The focus of the Enforcement Subgroup was on proper use of child safety restraints and the lack of compliance in the hotspot areas. A large number of children are riding unsecured in vehicles in these areas, and according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, three out of four safety seats are improperly installed. As motor vehicle crashes are the number one killer of children aged three to fourteen, compliance with child safety seat laws is of critical importance.

Currently under state law, individuals accused of violating the child safety seat statute can present any child safety seat to the court – without demonstrating ownership, proper knowledge of its use, or compliance with safety standards – and get their tickets dismissed. The Enforcement workgroup discussed this loophole, as well as the lack of current enforcement of the child safety seat statute and the lack of capacity for child passenger safety technicians to fit and provide car seats to the community in the face of high demand. Over several meetings, the group developed a model for a program in which violators would receive proper training in the use of child safety seats and be provided with a seat free of charge if they are unable to afford one. Such a program would be an excellent opportunity to increase compliance with the law and educate the public on this important safety issue.

In November 2012 the City Manager was directed by Council to apply for grant funding from TXDOT and other appropriate agencies for the implementation of a Child Safety Seat program. In response to this directive, Austin Police Department, in partnership with Public Works Department's Child Safety Program, applied for a \$75,000 Justice Assistance Grant. APD has been the lead on this grant, with PWD Child Safety Program, the Municipal Court, Dell Children's Hospital, and Children's Optimal Health collaborating as partners. In April 2013, the project was recommended for full funding by the Capital Area Council of Governments; unfortunately the final funding decision in late summer 2013 did not fund the program. The Child Safety Program, in partnership with APD, will continue to identify other grant-funding opportunities for which to apply.