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June 29, 2007

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VDH 07-00

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NETWORK OF SAFETY SEAT INSPECTIONS SITES PROTECTS CHILD PASSENGERS

New Virginia Child Restraint Laws Become Effective July 1

(Richmond, Va.) – Beginning July 1, parents and caregivers will be required by law to secure their children properly while riding in a vehicle, at least until the child’s eighth birthday. To help parents adjust to the upcoming mandates, health officials are reaching out to parents to educate them about the type of safety restraints necessary for each stage of childhood, from infancy to elementary school age.

Four out of five children under age 8 in Virginia are riding in safety seats that are improperly installed. To help reduce the threat this poses and increase the number of properly installed seats, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) has developed a network of inspection sites across Virginia where certified technicians will inspect safety seats for free and teach parents how to install and use them correctly.

“Of the fourteen deaths to child passengers under age 6 in Virginia in 2006, 5 were riding in improperly installed safety seats and 7 were not secured at all,” said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. “We hope the availability of the local inspection sites will encourage parents and caregivers to find the site nearest them and have their child’s safety seat inspected.”

A recent study by Safe Kids Worldwide reports that properly installed and correctly used safety seats decrease the risk of death by 71 percent for infants and 54 percent for toddlers. The report also found that parents retained their safety seat installation knowledge six weeks after receiving hands-on instruction at a safety seat clinic, and that 45 percent more seats were installed properly at a second safety check clinic than at the first.

As children grow, their requirements in safety seats change. To help keep kids safe, VDH injury prevention experts offer parents the following tips:

- Always keep infants up to age 1 and at least twenty pounds in a rear-facing seat in the back seat.
- Use forward-facing seats in the back seat for toddlers until they outgrow the weight and height limits labeled on the safety seat, which usually occurs when the child is about age 4.

Toddlers should never go directly from a safety seat into adult seat belts. Research from Partners for Child Safety demonstrated that the risk of injury for children ages 4 through 7 decreases by 59 percent when they ride in booster seats versus seat belts alone. Children should use booster seats in the back seat from about age 4 until the child reaches age 8 or 4 feet 9 inches tall. After that, children should “buckle up,” using safety belts in the back seat. Kids under twelve years old should ride in the back seat.

Also, rear-facing safety seats must be placed in the back seat of a vehicle, and children can no longer ride unrestrained in the rear cargo area of vehicles.

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Currently, there are 108 safety seat inspection sites in Virginia located mainly at fire, police and rescue stations. “We are working to increase the number of sites, especially in the Northern and Southside regions of the state,” said Tobey Anne Allen, VDH’s child passenger safety seat coordinator. Agencies that join the VDH network receive start-up supplies and guidance from the health department and are eligible for mini grants from VDH to buy safety seats and other equipment.

VDH provides free safety seats to families who otherwise could not afford them. More than 90,000 safety seats have been distributed since VDH’s Low Income Safety Seat Program began in 1996. Seats are available at more than 130 distribution sites across the state.

A list of safety seat inspection sites, information about the free safety seat program and complete information on the new child restraint law are on the VDH Web site at www.vahealth.org/civp/safetyseat/. Or you can call toll free (800) 732-8333.

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