

“Click it. Or ticket.”

As summer kicks off and families hit the road for vacations, Kansas Department of Transportation officials and law enforcement agencies across the state are reminding motorists to Click it. Or ticket.

The statewide seat belt enforcement crackdown runs from May 22 through June 4, concurrent with one of the busiest travel and holiday weekends of the year. More than 150 law enforcement agencies across the state will be on the lookout day and night.

“This effort starts with you,” said Chris Bortz, KDOT Traffic Safety Program Manager. “It’s your responsibility to make sure every passenger is buckled up. On the drive to zero fatalities, you are in the driver’s seat.”

Officials from KDOT, the Kansas Turnpike Authority, and the Kansas Highway Patrol detailed the 2017 campaign at a news conference at the Towanda Service Area, off I-35 near Wichita. Featured speaker, Vonnie Rickerson, of Fort Scott, shared her personal story of seeing seat belts save lives, and seeing crashes take lives away.

“When I was eight years old, our school bus passed beside a wreck,” Rickerson said. “I’ll never forget the crashed vehicle I saw from my window seat. The driver was not wearing a seat belt. The impact of the crash caused the driver to fly forward, hitting the steering wheel and dislodging her heart. She died instantly. The driver of the vehicle was my mom.”

Rickerson shed tears as she continued. It was July 2016 when she drove up to another, all-too-familiar crash scene. This time, her 15-year-old daughter and her daughter’s friend were inside the mangled car.

“I can’t express all of the emotions I felt as I drove through the horrific scene of the crash, then seeing a crumpled car that I didn’t think anybody could walk away from,” she said. “I was sure we had lost our babies.”

After hitting a tree, the car rolled twice and flipped end to end. When it finally came to rest, it was unrecognizable. Her daughter Hallie was unresponsive and was taken by helicopter to the hospital an hour away. But this time, the teens were wearing seat belts. And just two weeks later, they were back to living their lives.

“I believe with all my heart that seat belts saved the lives of my daughter and her friend that day,” Rickerson said. “And I believe if my mom had been wearing a

seat belt the day of her wreck, she may have lived as well.”

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, nearly half of the 22,441 passenger vehicle occupants killed in crashes in 2015 were unrestrained. At night (from 6 p.m. to 5:59 a.m.), that number soared to 57 percent of those killed. During the Click It. Or Ticket campaign, law enforcement agencies will be taking a no-excuses approach to seat belt law enforcement, writing citations day and night.

In Kansas, 127 of those who died in passenger vehicle crashes were not using a seat belt. Nationally, almost twice as many males were killed in crashes compared to females. Of the males killed in crashes in 2015, 52 percent were unrestrained. For females killed in crashes, 42 percent were not buckled up.

“We want travelers to do the one thing that gives them the best chance of surviving a serious crash: buckling up,” said Jason Weber, KTA Roadway Operations Manager. “If this enforcement campaign makes more people aware of the dangers of unrestrained driving and they begin to buckle up, we’ll consider it a success.”

“Many of us know someone who was killed in a crash because they did not buckle up,” said Technical Trooper Ben Gardner, Kansas Highway Patrol. “Please, help us spread this life-saving message before one more friend or family member is killed as a result of this senseless inaction. Seat belts save lives, and everyone – front seat and back, child and adult – needs to remember to buckle up, every trip, every time.”