Technology Can Avert Tragedies

By Sally Greenberg

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

April 4, 2005

While in Florida last week, I read about the tragic death of 2-year-old Veronica Rosenfeld, who was accidentally run over March 27 by her Boca Raton neighbor while he was backing out of his driveway.

Regrettably, Veronica's family is not alone in suffering such a loss. Last year, nearly 100 children were backed over and killed by vehicles whose drivers simply could not see them in the blind spot behind the car, according to Kids and Cars, a child safety and advocacy group.

Every vehicle has these blind spots -- more accurately called blind areas. Side and rearview mirrors are insufficient to combat them, and the longer and higher the vehicle, the bigger the blind area is likely to be.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that more than 2,400 children each year were treated for injuries sustained in backing-over incidents from 2001 through 2003.

These incidents could be prevented if drivers had a way to see or detect what is behind them while backing up -- either through rearview cameras or backup sensor devices. Unfortunately, the few vehicles that now come with this technology are higher-end models, and most devices

are available only as an option. Currently, the federal government requires no backup warning technology on any vehicle sold in the United States, nor does it require federal regulators to keep track of deaths and injuries caused by backovers.

Yet the problem of blind spots is very real. Consumers Union, publisher of Consumer Reports, measures the blind areas behind every vehicle we test -- placing cones the size of an average 2-year-old behind sedans, minivans, SUVs and pickups. We have discovered that many cars and trucks have dangerously large blind areas behind them.

The 2003 Honda Accord sedan we tested, a popular model, had a blind spot of 12 feet for an average-size driver, and 17 feet for a short driver. By far the biggest blind area we measured was in the 2002 Chevrolet Avalanche pickup truck: a whopping 51 feet behind a short driver. Neither vehicle has had significant design changes since those tests that would change their blind spot. (Blindspot information can be viewed free on the Consumer Reports Web site, ww
w.ConsumerReports.org
; at
www.SafeCarsforKids.org
; and at
www.kidsandcars.org
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Consumer Reports also has tested backover warning devices -- cameras and radar devices -- to see which are most effective in warning drivers about objects behind them. We found cameras providing rearview visibility were more reliable than backup sensors for letting drivers know what is behind them.

Some federal legislators recently have taken up the issue of vehicle blind spots, but passage of reforms has stalled in

Congress. Reps. Peter King, R-N.Y., and Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Ill., sponsored legislation in the last Congress to require backup warning devices or cameras in all vehicles. The bill never received a hearing.

Sens. Mike DeWine, R-Ohio, and Jay Rockefeller, D-W.V., have a pending bill that directs the federal government to address the problem of backover hazards. Both Senate and House measures would require including backovers in federal data to help regulators determine the severity of the problem.

No family should have to endure the loss of a child, and no driver should have to live with the consequences of backing over a child. We have the technology to prevent these unnecessary, tragic deaths, but the federal government and automakers have consistently failed to address the issue.

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