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Fire & Medical leader seeks grant to boost helmet giveaway program

BY GEORGE DIEPENBROCK

Rob Kort has spent the last decade trying to convince children to wear a helmet while biking or skating.

But the division chief with Lawrence-Douglas County Fire & Medical realized that something more was needed after the February accident that killed 6-year-old Bryce Olsen. Bryce, who was struck by a minivan while riding his scooter near Prairie Park School, wasn't wearing a helmet.

Now the city has applied for a \$15,000 grant with the Kansas Health Foundation to fund a program that would fit all kindergartners in Douglas County with a bicycle helmet and educate them about safety.

"If we made it where we could get everyone in one age group that has a helmet, then it could be that the odd person out is the one that doesn't have a helmet," Kort said.

Fire & Medical has supported helmet safety since 1996, giving away about 2,000 helmets a year at fire stations or safety fairs. City Hall spends about \$15,000 a year on helmet purchases, with part of the costs being underwritten by sponsorships from area businesses.

The city passed an ordinance in 2004 that requires officials to give a voucher for a helmet to younger riders not wearing one, but the program has not been implemented.

The kindergarten program would supplement the current helmet program, Kort said. He expects to know within two months whether the city will receive the grant or try to apply for another one.

If awarded the health foundation grant, the kindergarten program could begin in the spring of 2007, and Kort said he hoped area businesses eventually would donate to keep it going.

Bret Olsen, Bryce's father, called the new program a great idea because it would remind parents and children of the necessity of wearing a helmet.

"I'd hate to see other families go through what I've gone through," Olsen said.

The Olsen family is scheduled to help as part of the city's Helmet Fair on May 13 at Haskell Indian Nations University.