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Athens responders embrace community outreach with seat belt covers

When first responders arrive at a motor vehicle accident, the scene can be chaotic, especially when children are involved.

If a child or the child's parents are unable to communicate, responders do not know if the child has a special need. Children with autism or another special need may resist help, may not recognize danger and may become upset by the lights and noise.

The Mayor's Office saw a project online where a mother uses a Velcro seat belt cover to alert responders her child has a special need. Athens Police Chief Floyd Johnson and Athens Fire Chief Bryan Thornton embraced the idea as a community outreach project for their departments.

"The more information we can equip ourselves with as responders, the better we can serve our citizens," Thornton said.

Members of the Limestone County Legislative Delegation approved community grants to fund the purchase of 300 seat belt covers for fire and police. Half of the covers say, "I have autism. May not respond. May resist help. May be unaware of danger." Half say, "I have special needs. May not respond." Camdens Designs and Creations in Kentucky had a template for the seat belt covers and created them for the project.

Rep. Danny Crawford, Sen. Tom Butler and Sen. Tim Melson split the cost with three grants for a total of \$2,967.

APD and AFR will distribute the seat belt covers to families upon request.

Johnson and Thornton said this community outreach project will:

- Enable police, fire, and medical personnel to have the knowledge needed to understand a child may be resistant or non-communicative because of a special need and not necessarily from an unknown injury.
- Allow the responders to utilize specialized training in treating and communicating with a child who has autism or a special need.
- Enhance relationships between police, fire and the community by providing a positive interaction between officers, firefighters and citizens.

Fire Station No. 1 on Washington Street and the Athens Police Department will have the seat belt covers available for the public starting Monday, March 2. AFR and APD will also distribute the seat belt covers upon request at various community events, while supplies last.

"This is such a simple idea, but one that encourages us to reach out into our community and look for creative ways to better serve the public," Mayor Ronnie Marks said. "We appreciate Rep. Crawford, Sen. Butler and Sen. Melson for seeing the importance of this project."

Sen. Butler said he wants to share the idea statewide with other agencies. Rep. Crawford said this is the type project the delegation's community grant program is thrilled to fund.

Stacey Givens and Todd Tomerlin, each a parent with an autistic child, said being proactive allows all of those involved in a situation or emergency to respond in the best interest of the child or adult with a special need. Givens said during a traffic stop, her son Brooks became upset by the lights and siren and concerned she was

going to jail. Givens has an autism awareness car tag, and she said the officer saw it and responded with gentleness, which put her son and herself at ease.