



Press Release

For Immediate Release

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A Generous Mother Turns Tragedy Into Life-Saving Bilingual Campaign for Seat Belt Usage; Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts Donates First Billboard.

“I am so grateful for the help and support of so many people in the community and of the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts,” said Beatriz Fuentes, who has launched a bilingual seat belt campaign in memory of her daughter. “If my daughter’s tragedy can save lives and prevent brain injury, she will not have died in vain.”

Last summer, Natalie DeLeon and her boyfriend were on their way to visit friends when the car she was riding in rolled over on Carew Street in Springfield. DeLeon was ejected from the car. She had just turned 21 years-old and was not wearing a seat belt.

“There are so many instances where people needlessly suffer brain injury or are killed in car crashes because they were not wearing seat belts,” said Arlene Korab, executive director of the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. “Beatriz Fuentes’ campaign to raise awareness in the Springfield area will most definitely save lives, and we are delighted that she is reaching out to the bilingual community.”

The fatal accident spurred Beatriz Fuentes and her two remaining daughters to form a group – “The Friends of Natalie” – to promote seat belt use. Working closely with the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts (BIA-MA), the group has launched a bilingual campaign to raise funds for billboards urging seat belt use and for a safety program in local schools.

Last month, the group held a fund-raising dinner at the Greek Cultural Center in Springfield. Attended by more than 300 people, the event featured a spaghetti and meatballs dinner, a performance by Dazzles Dance Studio of Springfield, and a raffle – all generously donated by members of the community. More than \$5000 was raised for the seat belt awareness campaign. Arlene Korab, Executive Director of BIA-MA, spoke at the gathering, praising the mission and dedication of the group. She received a loud applause when she announced that BIA-MA would provide the group’s first billboard.

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The Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts (BIA-MA), a private, non-profit organization, provides support services to brain injury survivors and their families, offers programs to prevent brain injuries, and educates the public on the risks of irresponsible behavior and the impact of brain injury. The association also advocates for funding to support services for individuals with brain injury, supports legislation to prevent brain injuries, and collaborates on educational campaigns with state agencies and related associations, including Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Registry of Motor Vehicles, and Veterans Administration.

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Facts and Stats on Seat Belt Usage

- Seat belt usage – National Average – 82%.
- 67% of Massachusetts residents use seat belts.
- Massachusetts is 47th in ranking (out of 48 states that participated in a survey on seat belt usage); the only state lower is Mississippi.
- More than six people each day are ejected from their cars in Massachusetts motor vehicle accidents.
- 74% of drivers who had been drinking and driving and killed in car crashes were not wearing seat belts.
- A 15% increase in seat belt use would prevent 3,000-4,000 injuries and save Massachusetts an estimated \$80 million in healthcare, taxes, and insurance costs.
- Average inpatient costs for crash victims who were not wearing seat belts were 55% higher than for those who were belted.
- In Massachusetts, the average hospital charge for an unbelted patient is \$7,000, compared to \$1,000 for a belted patient.
- Seatbelts are 57% effective in preventing traumatic and fatal brain injuries.

Sources: CDC, NHTSA, BIA-USA, Governor's Highway Safety Bureau (Mass.), Harvard School of Public Health.