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**HEADLINE:** NO SEAT BELTS, NO MERCY IN ACCIDENTS FATAL CRASHES ON  
YOSEMITE SHAKE EMERGENCY WORKERS

**BYLINE:** BY KERRY MCCRAY, BEE STAFF WRITER

**BODY:**

It was 11:15 p.m. Dec. 27. Ken White, a captain with the Modesto Fire Department, had just finished writing a report on a grisly car crash that happened two days before.

The 41-year-old father of two shook his head as he recalled the details of the head-on collision that killed a 17-year-old girl and a 4-year-old boy Christmas night.

Yosemite Boulevard had looked like a battlefield. Bodies and engine parts lay in the street. White stared at the wall of the firehouse, trying to decompress. Then, something eerie happened:

"Head-on collision ... Yosemite Boulevard ... multiple injuries," a dispatcher's voice said over the loudspeaker at Fire Station 3 on El Vista Avenue.

The alarm was no joke. A second crash, about 400 yards east of the first, killed a 30-year-old mother and her 11-year-old daughter, and injured the woman's two young sons.

The similarities rattled firefighters, police, paramedics and other emergency personnel. Many tended to the drivers and passengers in both crashes.

It was not just the coincidence of time and place. None of the older people who died wore seat belts, and the 4-year-old was not riding in a safety seat. Five other children were in the car with the 4-year-old, and they had not been properly restrained, either, police said.

"If you can afford a cell phone, you can afford a baby seat," said White, part of Engine Co. 23.

Joe Culvahouse, a paramedic, and Natasha Oliveira, an emergency medical technician, were in their **American Medical Response** ambulance when the dispatcher announced the second crash.

"It's almost like you heard a collective 'What?' in the radio system," said Culvahouse, 34.

A paramedic for 13 years, he heard the urgency in the voice of the dispatcher, the same person who had sent them to the Christmas night crash. He knew this crash

must be serious, too.

When they arrived, they learned just how serious.

Oliveira covered the body of the 11-year-old, already pronounced dead.

Someone, perhaps a friend of the family, ran up and shouted, "What's wrong with her?"

"All I could say is, 'Please get out of the street,'" said Oliveira, 22.

Culvahouse said: "We didn't want any more patients."

Meanwhile, Jair Juarez, a 26-year-old firefighter, counted the victims. He rushed to a Cadillac Escalade pickup. The driver was fine. The passenger appeared to have a broken leg. She still wore her seat belt.

Juarez moved on to a Buick Riviera, the car the mother was driving. Her sons, ages 2 and 5, were obviously injured. They had been riding in the back seat, and were not in car seats, police said. The crash bounced the boys around in the car.

Juarez told his captain to call for more help. Right away.

The emergency workers did not let themselves think about the enormity of the situation until after they left the scene.

"We can't deal with it then," Oliveira said. "We need to do what we need to do to help save a life."

Usually, they get together and talk after a fatal crash, a bad fire or other disaster. They say the meetings, called debriefings, help them share their feelings and release their stress. They met after the Yosemite Boulevard crashes.

Talking informally helps, too.

"This is my support group, right here," said Oliveira, giving Culvahouse a slap on the back.

The day after the second double-fatal on Yosemite Boulevard, White and Juarez -- in their fire engine -- stopped at Oakdale Road and El Vista Avenue.

A car with three children in the back seat pulled up. The children climbed over one another, trying to get a look at the firetruck. None of them wore seat belts or rode in car seats.

White rolled down his window and asked the mother to please -- please -- buckle up her children.

"All you can do is ask people to wear seat belts," Culvahouse said. "We can't go to everyone and show them pictures of what happens if they don't."

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**GRAPHIC:** (ADRIAN MENDOZA / THE BEE) Left to right, Jair Juarez, Joe Culvahouse, Ken White, Natasha Oliveira and Jerardo Avila talk about recent fatal accidents on Yosemite Boulevard.

(MARTY BICEK / THE BEE) First aid is administered to one of the injured at the scene of a fatal automobile accident on Yosemite Boulevard on Christmas night. (this photo ran Final edition only)

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