

San Francisco works to improve pedestrian safety

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By Katherine Seligman

SAN FRANCISCO -- Its been almost a year since Jikiah Stevens stepped off the sidewalk near her home for what she assumed was a routine walk to her job downtown.

When the walk sign changed, I went into the crosswalk and the next thing I knew I'd been hit, said Stevens, who is still recovering from a life-threatening head injury and trying to pay a mountain of medical bills.

Stevens is part of a distressing statistic in this compact, hilly city that prides itself on being pedestrian-friendly and where walkers make more than a million trips a day. Vehicles struck more than 800 people last year, killing 21, nearly a record.

Walk San Francisco, an advocacy group, recently gave the city an A+ in walkability, but handed down a miserable mark for pedestrian safety a D+.

In an effort to make streets safer, at least three city agencies in the past year have begun supporting a strategy called Vision Zero, aimed at ending pedestrian fatalities within the next 10 years. Based on a plan created in Sweden in the late 1990s, Vision Zero assumes that such crashes are the result of human error that can be lessened, if not eliminated, through better engineering, education, traffic law enforcement and analysis of data.

New York City, the most treacherous city for pedestrians, and Chicago also have adopted Vision Zero plans. The pedestrian fatality rate in San Francisco, the second highest, is two times more than across the bay in Alameda County and four times the national average.

The concept is that these fatalities are preventable, said Nicole Schneider, executive director of Walk San Francisco, which has pressed for the plan. No one should have to die simply by trying to get around the city.

It may have been a string of three fatalities on and around New Years Day that prompted public outcry. The deaths included a 6-year-old girl who was crossing the street with her mother and brother, who were also hit.

The city transportation agency and health department pored through five years of data and found that 60 percent of the accidents happened in six areas. The deadliest spots were located along wide, one-way streets that drivers tend to treat like freeways such as Bush Street, where Stevens was hit and where three others have been injured since then and congested neighborhoods adjacent to downtown.

The transportation agency drew up a list of 24 pedestrian safety projects to be completed over the next two years. It has started painting sidewalk extensions and ladder-style crosswalks with huge stripes, changing the timing of lights to slow down traffic and removing car parking near crosswalks.

The health department has been working on education projects with seniors and children, including mapping safe walking and biking routes to school. Another public education campaign is using billboards and media ads to urge drivers to slow down and walkers to pay attention.

The Police Department has begun taking reports on all bike and pedestrian accidents and reviewing past

collisions to see whether citations should be issued.

But the daunting list of needed improvements comes with an estimated price tag of \$240 million. The city's Walk First initiative, announced this year, dedicates \$17 million to fix 170 intersections. Two November ballot measures raising transportation fees and taxes could bring in another \$50 million, still leaving Vision Zero with a significant shortfall.

Sweden has seen a 50 percent drop in pedestrian deaths since adopting Vision Zero. Engineers and public health officials in San Francisco have studied the Swedish plan, hoping to bring key components here.

Walk San Francisco has given the city an overall C+ on its progress for making streets safer. But Monique Porsandeh of Berkeley is still nervous when she crosses the street in San Francisco. Hit by a driver who never stopped, she spent a month in the hospital with multiple broken bones, internal bleeding and a severe brain injury.

I definitely make sure the driver sees me before I step into that crosswalk, said Porsandeh, 27. I am very aware now. I watch other pedestrians and see what they do, and I cringe.

Although it's not hard to see pedestrians jaywalking, standing in the street or talking on cellphones while crossing, cars cause most pedestrian collisions. In the past five years, cars have been at fault in 64 percent of accidents.

You're always kind of jumping out of the way, said Stevens, 31, whose fractured skull and brain injury left her with a permanent loss of smell and taste. People speed downtown. It's really a problem.

The woman who hit her stopped, and Stevens remembers her taking responsibility. But she was never cited, and her insurance will cover only \$15,000 of Stevens' more than \$140,000 in medical bills.

This is a lifelong thing for me, said Stevens, who is now facing bankruptcy. The person who hit me didn't even have to go to traffic school to learn how to drive safer.

Stevens can no longer work as a hairstylist, but she is able to do photography, something she spent time on before the accident.

And she has not lost her voice. She's spoken at several city meetings to urge passage of Vision Zero goals.

As part of an effort to raise awareness, she plans to create a series of documentary photos showing victims wearing hospital gowns at the locations where they were hit.

When I couldn't hold my hand straight and I couldn't even get food to my mouth, I could still hold a camera, she said. To help make the streets safer is the best thing I can think of doing.

A fund to pay medical bills for Stevens has been set up at www.youcaring.com/medical-fundraiser/jikaiah-recovery-fund-/96817; one for Porsandeh is at www.youcaring.com/helpmoniqueheal.

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