

Flags aid pedestrians, educate drivers

Pedestrians have a new tool to help them cross 20 busy intersections in Dane County—a set of red plastic flags. They are designed to get drivers to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks and to teach walkers how to cross effectively. The project also includes education for drivers and enforcement by police.

"We had been trying things for years and nothing worked very well until we put in the flags," says Ann Clark of Madison who helped initiate a trial of the flags in May 2002. Residents had identified crossing busy Monroe Street as the neighborhood's top problem.

"It's a communication tool," says Clark. "It's a way of letting drivers know you're coming across." The most frequent users are families with children, she observes. The idea originated in Kirkland, Washington. Salt Lake City, Utah, adopted and expanded the program. The flags, now at 105 Salt Lake intersections, have helped dramatically improve its ranking as one of the worst cities for pedestrians in the US.

The Madison flags are made by volunteers of 12"x12" red plastic squares stapled to 1/4"x3' dowels. Materials come from local hardware stores and cost about 50 cents each. The flags sit on both ends of the crosswalk in holders made of 4" PVC pipe attached to existing posts. Volunteers monitor the holders, redistributing flags and replenishing the supply as needed.

"This being a grassroots effort and neighborhoods taking ownership of it is really critical for us," says Arthur Ross, Pedestrian and Bicycle Coordinator in the Madison Traffic Engineering Department. "Traffic Engineering doesn't have the staff resources to replace flags and do education."

Education and enforcement

Education helps make the flags effective. "The community groups have done a good job of showing people how to use the flags," says Ross. "It's a way to educate pedestrians on how to be effective street crossers."

TV and newspaper stories, leafleting to neighborhood residences, and law enforcement efforts also help. The goal is to educate drivers to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks as required by state law (Section 346.24(1), Wis. Stats.).

"We do education and enforcement in a tiered effort," says Officer Stacey Vilas of the Madison Police Department's Traffic Enforcement Safety Team.



Officers begin by handing out flyers to cars stopped at traffic lights and giving warning citations to drivers who don't yield, then later issue citations for amounts from \$130 to \$225.

"You need enforcement," says Vilas. "If you don't have the concept that you could be penalized, you will continue to do something you're not supposed to do." Her unit is enforcing a Madison ordinance, but other local law enforcement agencies write citations based on state Statutes.



Success spreads the program

The flags seem to work. A study of the Monroe Street crossing found that motorists stopped for pedestrians nearly 80% of the time. This compares with a yield-to-pedestrians rate of less than 5% at other pedestrian crossings.

This success helped the Dane County Safe Community Coalition (DCSCC) secure a grant to offer the program county-wide in 2003. Volunteer groups and local law enforcement agencies adopted the flags for 20 intersections in June. Funds from Active for Life, a project of AARP and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, bought equipment for flags and flag holders, printed informational brochures, and paid for billboards promoting the project.



One of the new sites is the Village of Marshall, about 20 miles east of Madison. The flags now help pedestrians cross Main Street (STH 19) at Pardee St. on a main route to the schools.

"It's a tool to make crossing the street safer, faster, and more pleasant," says Village Police Chief Lee Hellenbrand. "We've seen a lot of young people and adults use the flags since they were put in June 9th." The Community Officer, who got the flags from DCSCC, did extensive education the first few days after they were installed. The Village is considering other intersections for flags, will continue education, and plans future enforcement efforts, Hellenbrand says.

"It's a great way to say: 'Hey pedestrians are important.'" Officer Vilas agrees.

For more information, including *Tips for Pedestrians* and *Tips for Drivers* see the *Safe Community Coalition* website www.safecommunitycoalition.org or contact Coordinator Cheryl Witke at 608/256-6713. See also www.dmna.org for Monroe St. neighborhood flag program.