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By David Garrick

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Paola Potts holds one of her new warning signs as she pets her dog Dante.

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With the weather warming up, Escondido resident Paola Potts is stepping up her campaign against people leaving dogs and children unattended inside vehicles.

Ace Parking recently installed special warning signs created by Potts in all 17 of its San Diego lots, and Westfield North County mall officials say they might do the same in their giant lot.

Meanwhile, animal advocacy groups across North County have begun helping Potts search for sponsors to pay for the signs so cities and plaza owners can install them at no cost.

Potts said it has been relatively easy to gather support, because her campaign has the potential to prevent suffering and save the lives of pets and children.

“These are preventable tragedies,” she said. “People are unknowingly causing harm.”

A recent study by the Animal Protection Institute showed that even with windows slightly open, 85-degree outdoor temperatures translate to 102 degrees inside a car within 10 minutes and 120 degrees within half an hour.

Potts said most people don’t realize how warm their cars get in the summer, so they often leave a pet or child unattended while running short errands.

Parking in the shade can help. But dogs cool down by breathing cool air, and the shade only makes the air less hot, not cool, she said.

So Potts wants signs all over the county warning people of the dangers and reminding them that California has criminal penalties for such behavior.

“Like with smoking and seat belts, we change and learn through education,” she said.

If people see a child or pet trapped in a warm car, they should dial 911, she said.

Potts launched her campaign last September by lobbying the Escondido City Council to post warning signs in municipal parking lots.

City officials embraced the concept and then approved the signs for all private lots. But they haven’t yet OK’d them for municipal lots.

Barbara Redlitz, the city’s planning chief, said this week that one issue needing exploration would be who pays for maintaining the signs and replacing them when they decay.

Redlitz said officials would accelerate the process if the City Council directed them. Potts said she plans to lobby the council again later this spring.

Media coverage of her efforts in Escondido last fall allowed Potts to form partnerships with the Escondido Humane Society, which came up with the sponsorship idea, and nonprofit San Diego Animal Advocates in Encinitas.

Jane Cartmill, director of that organization, said she’s working with the Encinitas City Council on similar requests.

In addition, she said, San Diego Animal Advocates recently printed 500 bumper stickers warning people about the dangers of leaving pets inside hot cars.

“Every summer we constantly see an awful lot of dogs in cars,” she said. “People think they’ll only be gone for a minute, but it ends up being longer. We hope this campaign is going to catch on.”

Cartmill’s organization paid for 10 of the 17 signs installed last week by Ace. Three of the signs were sponsored by Sally Costello, executive director of the Escondido Humane Society, and the other four were funded by individuals.

Potts said they cost about \$55 each, but that the price could fall with a bulk order.

Kristin Ludwick, an Ace Parking spokeswoman, said this week that company officials immediately embraced Potts' campaign and that Ace might expand it outside San Diego.

"Ace liked and appreciated Paola's passion for saving lives," Ludwick said.

Potts has focused much of her effort on Escondido's Westfield North County mall, which has one of the largest parking lots in the region.

Mall officials agreed to place fliers inside warning people about the dangers, but they haven't approved installing signs.

Victoria Muschek, the mall's marketing director, said one potential hurdle is that the city owns the land beneath the 83-acre mall. But Muschek said mall officials would like to help if possible.

People interested in sponsoring a sign and plaza owners interested in installing them can email Potts at

paolapotts@cox.net.