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Fest builds healthy children

Strong Kids/Safe Kids draws thousands as it teaches families health, safety lessons.

By Ray Finger
rfinger@stargazette.com
Star-Gazette
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HORSEHEADS -- The 22nd annual Strong Kids/Safe Kids Festival is expected to draw record numbers this year during its first appearance at the Chemung County Fairgrounds.

Last year's event drew between 8,000 and 10,000 people to Eldridge Park, co-chair Misty Purdy said Saturday.

This year's festival could draw as many as 15,000 people despite overcast skies, she said.

"It's great that they're at the fairgrounds because there's a lot more space and it's not quite as crowded and crunched together," said mother Jamie Roland of Elmira, who was enjoying the day with daughters Aylish McCloe, 5, and Kieran McCloe, 7, and 1-year-old son Alexander McCloe.

Aylish said she enjoyed jumping on the air-filled attractions.

Kieran liked playing miniature golf so far and had gotten a balloon.

The event that promotes awareness of children's health and safety issues had once again outgrown its space, co-chair Susan Collins said.

It started at Grove Park, moved to Wisner Park and then Eldridge Park. There is now plenty of room at the fairgrounds to grow even further, she said.

"I'm very excited," Collins said. "It's certainly the largest event we've ever had. We have more participants."

There are more than 100 agencies involved this year, she said.

The new location has really brought the county together, Collins said. It had been considered an Elmira event but is now a countywide event, she said.

"Truly Chemung County is coming together to build this event, to make it bigger and better," Purdy said.

The event focuses on giving families information about community services and safety issues while engaging children in fun activities where they can learn and their parents can learn with them, Collins said.

"We know it takes healthy families to build healthy kids," she said.

"There is a lot of safety education going on out here."

Amanda Allen of Horseheads comes with her family every year and was back again Saturday with her 6-year-old son, 8-year-old daughter and a 9-year-old cousin.

"It's a good idea for the kids to learn," she said, adding that she also likes the new location. "It's



JEFF RICHARDS/Star-Gazette

Megan Blitz of Horseheads and New York State Trooper Larry Wolkonowski buckle Blitz's son Kienan, 1, into a new car seat provided by New York State Safe Kids Network during Strong Kids/Safe Kids at the Chemung County Fairgrounds.

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closer," she said.

All activities and services were provided free to children and their families and included water and fire safety, vision screening, lead testing and car seat safety checks.

Fire-trucks, police cars and ambulances were on display, and an appearance by an emergency helicopter was planned in the afternoon.

"This place is awesome, and they've got more things here this year," said Josh Lafler, 13, of Elmira, who was at the event with his parents and brothers.

"The people here are pretty nice. They come up to you and shake your hand."

Strong Kids/Safe Kids is organized by a volunteer committee that solicits donations from businesses and organizations to help buy supplies, printing, gifts, postage and performer fees.

Any profits from food sales are used to fund start-up costs for the next year's event and add attractions.