

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines

In today's emergency services organizations, there is a growing need for the development and use of standard operating guidelines and issue specific training. One of the areas that requires a great deal of attention is the operation of emergency vehicles.

Chief Officers, as well as drivers, need to recognize the fact that the emergency vehicle response is the basis for the success or failure of all other emergency functions. These expensive vehicles carry all of the portable emergency equipment in addition to all of the personnel of the organization. Without the safe conveyance of these vehicles to the emergency scene, the emergency service organization cannot achieve its' mission of saving lives and protecting property.

Having sound emergency vehicle response guidelines in place will assist the emergency service organization in providing sound direction to its' officers and drivers. The following guidelines may be used to implement, supplement or enhance the emergency vehicle response policies and provide the basis for driver training for most emergency service organizations.

Your emergency services organization should review the following best practices and compare them to your organization's SOGs, state statutes and applicable standards. Prior to implementation the SOGs should be reviewed by legal counsel.

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Purpose

Responding to any emergency call, the _____ places a great deal of responsibility on the drivers of our emergency vehicles. Not only must emergency vehicles drivers provide prompt conveyance of the apparatus, equipment, and personnel to provide service to those in need, but as importantly, must accomplish this task in the safest and most prudent manner possible. Emergency vehicle drivers have in their care, custody and control most of the major assets possessed by this organization (the vehicle, portable equipment, personnel). Emergency vehicle drivers also have a higher standard of care to provide to the general motoring public and must make every attempt possible to provide due regard for the safety of others. Drivers must constantly monitor and reduce the amount of risk and exposure to potential losses during each and every response. Safe arrival at the emergency scene shall be, and must always remain, the first priority of all emergency vehicle drivers. In order to accomplish this enormous task all emergency vehicles drivers shall become familiar with, and constantly abide by the following policies and procedures.

Procedures

1. Circle of safety

Prior to entering the cab and starting the vehicle, the emergency vehicle driver shall make a circle of safety around the vehicle to see that all equipment is secured, that all compartment doors are securely closed and any physical obstructions moved out of the way. During the circle of safety the emergency vehicle driver shall encircle the vehicles and visually inspect all 4 sides and the top of the vehicle before entering the cab. He/she should also verify right side and rear clearance with the person riding in the officer position. This shall be conducted prior to moving the vehicle regardless of whether or not the vehicle is about to leave on an emergency or non-emergency.

2. Warning devices and true emergencies

When responding to a true emergency¹, all audible and visual warning devices will be operated at all times regardless of time of day and/or traffic conditions. All emergency vehicle drivers must understand that warning devices are not always effective in making other vehicle operators aware of your presence. Warning devices only request the right-of-way, they do not insure the right-of-way.

¹ The definition of a true emergency is a situation in which there is a high probability of death or serious injury to an individual or significant property loss, and actions by an emergency vehicle driver may reduce the seriousness of the situation.

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3. Vehicle control and right-of-way

All drivers shall attempt to maintain control of the vehicle that they are operating in such a manner as to provide the maximum level of safety for both their passengers and the general public. Emergency vehicle drivers should be aware that the civilian vehicle operators may not react in the manner in which is expected or felt to be appropriate. An attempt should be made to have options available when passing or overtaking vehicles. If another vehicle operator fails to yield the right of way to an emergency vehicle, the emergency vehicle driver cannot force the right of way, nor can you assume the right of way, therefore you do not have the right of way until the other vehicle yields to you.

The emergency vehicle driver shall be aware of his/her rate of closure on other vehicles and a pedestrian at all times to make sure that a safe following distance is established and maintained. All drivers shall follow the rule for safe following distance and allow 1 second of following distance for every 10 feet of vehicle length for speeds under 40 mph and add 1 additional second for each 10 mph for speeds over 40 mph.

4. Response speeds

When responding to a true emergency only, drivers shall operate the vehicle they are driving at as close to the **posted speed limit** as possible, but not to exceed ten (10) miles per hour over the posted speed limit, conditions permitting. Examples of conditions requiring slower response speeds include but are not limited to;

- slippery road conditions
- inclement weather
- poor visibility
- heavy or congested traffic conditions
- sharp curves

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5. Intersection Practices

Extreme care should be taken when approaching any intersection as intersections are the locations responsible for a large percentage of major accidents involving emergency vehicles. Drivers are required to practice the organizations intersection operating guidelines during all emergency responses.

Uncontrolled intersections

Any intersection that does not offer a control device (stop sign, yield or traffic signal) in the direction of travel of the emergency vehicle or where a traffic control signal is green upon the approach of the emergency vehicle all emergency vehicle drivers should do the following:

- Scan the intersection for possible hazards (right turns on red, pedestrians, vehicles traveling fast, etc.). Observe traffic in all 4 directions (left, right, front, rear)
- Slow down if any potential hazards are detected and cover the brake pedal with the driver's foot.
- Change the siren cadence not less than 200' from intersection
- Avoid using the opposing lane of traffic if at all possible.

Emergency vehicle drivers should always be prepared to stop. If another vehicle operator fails to yield the right of way to an emergency vehicle, the emergency vehicle driver cannot force the right of way, nor can you assume the right of way, therefore you do not have the right of way until the other vehicle yields to you.

Controlled intersections

Any intersection controlled by a stop sign, yield sign, yellow traffic light or a red traffic light requires **Prudent Action** by the emergency vehicle driver. The following steps should be taken:

- Do not rely on warning devices to clear traffic
- Scan the intersection for possible hazards (right turns on red, pedestrians, vehicles traveling fast etc.) as well as driver options
- Begin to slow down well before reaching the intersection and cover the brake pedal with the drivers foot, continue to scan in 4 directions (left, right, front,, back)
- Change the siren cadence not less than 200' from intersection
- Scan intersection for possible passing options (pass on right, left, wait, etc.) avoid using the opposing lane of traffic if at all possible
- Be prepared, during an emergency response, to bring the vehicle to a complete stop for the following:
 - when directed by a law enforcement officer
 - for red traffic lights
 - for stop signs
 - at negative right-of-way intersections
 - when the driver cannot account for visible traffic in the lanes of traffic in an intersection
 - when other intersection hazards are present
 - when encountering a stopped school bus with flashing warning lights
- Establish eye contact with other vehicle drivers; have partner communicate all is clear; reconfirm all other vehicles are stopped
- Account for traffic one lane of traffic at a time treating each lane of traffic as a separate intersection

This is a sample guideline furnished to you by VFIS. Your organization should review this guideline and make the necessary modifications to meet your organization's needs. The intent of this guideline is to assist you in reducing exposure to the risk of injury, harm, or damage to personnel, property, and the general public. For additional information on this topic, contact your VFIS Risk Control Representative at (800) 233-1957.

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Railroad intersections

At any time an emergency vehicle driver approaches an unguarded rail crossing he/she shall bring the apparatus or vehicle he/she is operating to a complete stop before entering the grade crossing. In addition the emergency vehicle driver shall perform the following prior to proceeding:

- turn off all sirens and air horns
- operator the motor at idle speed
- turn off any other sound producing equipment or accessories
- open the windows and listen for a train's horn

6. Non-emergency response

When responding to a call in a non-emergency response mode or normal flow of traffic (non-code 3 or when not responding to a true emergency) the vehicle will be operated without any audible or visual warning devices and in compliance with all state motor vehicle laws that apply to civilian traffic. At no time should any emergency vehicle be operated during response with only visual warning devices.

7. Ordinary travel procedures

All drivers shall obey all traffic laws and traffic control devices when driving any fire department vehicle under ordinary travel conditions. Any driver observed breaking any traffic laws or driving any vehicle in an aggressive manner will be subject to disciplinary action including, suspension of driving privileges.

8. Riding policy

The department requires all persons riding on fire apparatus to be seated in approved riding positions and be secured to the vehicle by seat belts whenever the vehicle is in motion. The emergency vehicle driver and/or the person riding in the officer position shall verify that all personnel are properly seated and in seat belts before the vehicle is moved. Standard communication signals should be formulated and utilized by all personnel.

The department prohibits the riding on tailsteps, sidesteps, running boards, or any other exposed position. Personnel who perform emergency medical care while the vehicle is in motion should be secured to the vehicle by a seat belt or safety harness designed for occupant restraint.

9. Backing

The department recognizes that backing emergency vehicles is made hazardous by the fact that the driver cannot see much of where he/she intends to go. The department recommends that whenever possible drivers should avoid backing as the safest way to back up a vehicle is not to back up at all. When it is necessary to back-up any departmental vehicle all drivers shall follow one of the two following measures would be taken.

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- The department's first choice of backing procedures is that before any vehicle is put into reverse and backed that a spotter be put in place near the rear of the vehicle. The spotter should be safely positioned so that the emergency vehicle driver can see them at all times. If at any time the emergency vehicle driver loses sight of the spotter, he/she shall stop immediately until the spotter makes him/her visible again.
- If conditions exist that make use of spotters impossible, all drivers, before attempting to back up any fire department vehicle, shall will make a circle of safety to see that; no person or persons are directly behind the vehicle or in its intended path of travel; all equipment is secured and that all compartment doors are securely closed; any physical obstructions are moved out of the way. The emergency vehicle driver should also note all potential obstructions in the intended path of travel.

10. Response in private owned vehicles

When any member responds to the station or to the scene of an emergency in his/her private vehicle, each member must strictly adhere to all applicable motor vehicle laws. Privately owned vehicles are not provided with the same exemptions that are provided to emergency vehicles. No member of the organization will be permitted to violate any motor vehicle laws, including but not limited to;

- Speed limits
- Going through traffic control devices
- Passing in an unsafe manner

While it is recognized that timeliness in response to an emergency is important, it is imperative that all drivers understand that their **private vehicles are not emergency vehicles and therefore are not afforded any exemptions or special privileges under state law.** Any driver observed breaking any traffic laws or operating any vehicle in an aggressive or unsafe manner will be subject to disciplinary action including, suspension, loss of driving privileges and withdrawal of courtesy light permit.

Acknowledgment

I _____ acknowledge that I have received a copy of the _____ Emergency Vehicle Response Plan and have also been trained and understand the items and instructions contained in the policy. I also understand the importance of safe operation of this organization vehicles, and will abide by all of the tactical and administrative operating guidelines contained in this document.

Signed _____ Date _____

Original - personnel file

Copy - driver