

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Personal Vehicle Response

Most volunteer emergency service departments rely heavily on the ability of their members to respond to calls, either to the scene or the station, in their personal vehicles. While this is essential to the organization's ability to react to emergencies in a timely manner, there are also inherent risks.

Motor Vehicle Laws

The most significant risk associated with allowing volunteers to respond in their personal vehicles is that they may operate them as if they are emergency vehicles. All too often, this leads to accidents. While motor vehicle laws vary from state to state, all states address this issue similarly: personal vehicles are not emergency vehicles and are not permitted the same, if any, exemptions to motor vehicle laws. For example, while licensed emergency vehicles are allowed to exceed the posted speed limit, move against the normal flow of traffic and proceed through a negative intersection control device, personal vehicles driven by volunteers are required to obey the state motor vehicle code.

Courtesy Lights

Some motor vehicle codes address the use of blue or red "courtesy lights." Basically, these are a visual request asking other drivers to allow you to pass them upon your approach. They are not a demand for right of way, nor do they permit the driver to illegally pass or speed up to overtake any vehicle.

Alternative Solutions

Your organization may wish to reduce or eliminate the risks associated with members responding in their personal vehicles by looking at alternative ways of getting personnel to where they are needed. For example, the creation and use of regular duty crews (members staffing predetermined shifts) would eliminate the need to have large numbers of volunteers responding to every call. A duty crew could staff at least a full first unit response, which can usually handle most calls.

Standard Operating Procedures

If your members are going to continue to respond to calls in personal vehicles, your organization should reduce the risk of death or injury to them and to the general public by developing and enforcing standard operating procedures (SOPs). These procedures should include, but not be limited to, the following:

1. Volunteers responding in personal vehicle must obey their state motor vehicle code with respect to courtesy light and siren privileges.
2. Courtesy lights must not be used by volunteers as a license to operate their personal vehicles as if they are emergency vehicles. All courtesy lights should be approved by the chief of the department and a written permit issued. The permit should include the "rules of the road" that apply.
3. Volunteers responding in personal vehicles should never exceed the posted speed limit.

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.

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

4. Volunteers responding in personal vehicles should come to a complete stop at all stop signs and red traffic signals and must wait for normal right of way before proceeding.
5. Procedures for at-the-scene parking/staging should be included in all SOPs.
6. Individual volunteers must have personal auto liability insurance with appropriate liability limits that protect not only the volunteer but also your organization.

Once they are developed, SOPs should be included in all new-member orientations and driver training sessions. Every member should receive a written copy of your SOPs and sign off that they have received them and understand them. In addition, your organization should develop written enforcement and progressive discipline guidelines for any member who violates your procedures.

When your volunteers respond to calls, they need to understand that, first and foremost, they must arrive at the emergency scene or the station safely in order to be of any help to the public.