

EMERGENCY VEHICLE RESPONSE GUIDELINES

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

PLEASE READ CAREFULLY

Emergency vehicle response is the basis for the success or failure of all other emergency functions. These expensive vehicles carry the organization's portable emergency equipment and personnel. Without the safe conveyance of these vehicles to the emergency scene, the emergency service organization (ESO) cannot achieve its mission of saving lives and protecting property.

Having sound emergency vehicle response guidelines in place helps assist the ESO in providing sound direction to leadership and vehicle drivers. The following guidelines may be used to implement, supplement or enhance existing Emergency Vehicle Response policies and provide helpful suggestions for driver training for most ESOs.

Please review the following best practices and compare them to the organization's SOGs, state statutes and applicable standards. The material provided in these Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines is given solely for general information and educational purposes, and should not be construed as legal or expert advice on any subject matter. These Guidelines are designed to be used by your representatives in connection with risk mitigation, and are not an attempt to offset any local, state, or federal regulating entity or agency. Volunteer Firemen's Insurance Services, Inc. (VFIS) specifically disclaims any and all liability for any act or omission by any person in connection with the use or implementation of any information contained herein, including third party content. VFIS does not make any representation or warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the results obtained by the use, adherence or implementation of any material contained herein and makes no representation, warranty, or guarantee as to the accuracy, completeness, timeliness or reliability of any third party content. Any reference to third party services, processes, products, or other information does not constitute or imply any endorsement, sponsorship or recommendation by VFIS, unless expressly stated otherwise.

EMERGENCY VEHICLE RESPONSE OPERATING GUIDELINES OF THE

Purpose

Responding to any emergency call, the _____ places a great deal of responsibility on our emergency vehicle drivers. Not only must you provide prompt conveyance of the vehicles, equipment and personnel to provide service to those in need, but just as importantly, must accomplish this task in the safest and most prudent manner possible. As an emergency vehicle driver in our organization, you have in your care, custody and control most of the major assets possessed by this organization (the vehicle, portable equipment, personnel, etc.). 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 every response. Safe arrival at the destination remains the first priority of all emergency vehicle drivers. In order to accomplish this enormous task, it is important for emergency vehicle drivers to 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, complete a circle of safety around the vehicle to assure all equipment is secured, all compartment doors are securely closed and any physical obstructions are moved out of the way. Encircle the vehicle and visually inspect all four sides and the top of the vehicle. Also, verify right side and rear clearance with the person riding in the front passenger position. Do this prior to moving the vehicle regardless of whether or not the vehicle is about to leave on an emergency or non-emergency response.

2. Sterile Cab

In 1981, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) enacted policies to help control the number of accidents involving distracted pilots. This practice is commonly known in the aviation industry as the "sterile cockpit rule." It prohibits any activity that is non-essential during critical phases of flight such as takeoff and landing (14 C.F.R. § 135.100). ESOs should adopt the sterile cockpit concept and create "sterile cabs" for their emergency vehicles.

- Cell phone use is not permitted, even if a hands-free device is available (includes calls and texts).
- The driver should not use onboard two-way communications or warning devices unless no other crewmember is available to complete the task.
- Establish an agreed upon system of critical communication. Some verbal commands that may be used include "clear right," "clear left," "prepare to stop," and "vehicle not stopping."
- Avoid non-essential personal communication between crew members during emergency response
- Only a passenger and not the driver may use electronic reporting devices, GPS units, and mobile data terminals. Furthermore, the passenger must limit usage during emergency response so they can assist in identifying hazards.
- Maintain a clean and sterile cab that is free of objects placed on the dash and items of personnel kept in the vehicle. These items are distractions and can also become airborne during emergency maneuvers or accidents.

3. Warning devices and true emergencies

When responding to a true emergency, audible and visual warning devices will be operated at all times regardless of time of day and/or traffic conditions. 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 assure the right-of-way.

4. Vehicle control and right-of-way

Attempt to maintain control of the vehicle in a manner that provides the maximum level of safety for both the passengers and the public. Be aware that civilian vehicle operators may not react in a manner that is expected or felt to be appropriate. Make an attempt 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.

Be aware of the rate of closure (comparison of time and space) on other vehicles and pedestrians to make sure an appropriate approach speed and/or safe following distance is established and maintained. Adhere to the rule for safe following distance. According to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCA), allow one second of following distance for every 10 feet of vehicle length for speeds under 40 mph and add one additional second for each 10 mph for speeds over 40 mph.

5. Response speeds

When responding to a true emergency only, operate the vehicle at as close to the posted speed limit as possible, utilizing due regard for the safety of others.

- Due regard is defined as the manner in which a reasonably careful person performing similar duties and under similar circumstances would act.
- Response speed should always be guided by the type and size of vehicle being operated, the type of road and road conditions that are present, time of day, weather conditions and traffic volume; never by the type of emergency.

During certain situations, the vehicle may need to be operated at a slower speed, including but not limited to:

- Slippery road conditions
- Inclement weather
- Poor visibility
- Heavy or congested traffic conditions
- Sharp curves

6. Intersection Practices

Use extreme care when approaching any intersection as they are the locations responsible for a large percentage of major accidents involving emergency vehicles. Drivers are required to practice the organization's intersection operating guidelines during all emergency responses.

Uncontrolled intersections

For any intersection that does not offer a control device (stop sign, yield sign, yellow or red traffic signal) in the direction of travel of the emergency vehicle, complete the following:

- Scan the intersection for possible hazards (right turns on red, pedestrians, vehicles traveling fast, etc.).
- Observe traffic in all four 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 the intersection.
- Avoid using the opposing lane of traffic if at all possible.

Controlled intersections

Any intersection controlled by a stop sign, yield sign, yellow or red traffic signal requires Prudent Action by the emergency vehicle driver. Consider the following steps:

- Do not rely on warning devices to clear traffic.
- Scan the intersection for possible hazards (right turns on red, pedestrians, vehicles traveling fast, etc.) and driver options.
- Begin to slow down well before reaching the intersection and cover the brake pedal with the drivers' foot. Continue to scan in four directions (left, right, front, back).
- When approaching a traffic signal be aware of "stale" green or yellow caution signals, begin to slow and prepare to stop as these will be turning red.
- 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. Consider using the lane of least resistance that is consistent with your intended direction of travel.

During emergency response, bring the vehicle to a complete stop for the following:

- When directed by a law enforcement officer
- Red traffic signals
- Stop signs
- Negative right-of-way intersection
- 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, and reconfirm all other vehicles are stopped.
- Account for traffic one lane at a time, treating each lane of traffic as a separate intersection.
- Railroad intersections

When approaching an unguarded rail crossing, bring the vehicle to a complete stop before entering the grade crossing. In addition, perform the following prior to proceeding:

- Turn off all sirens and air horns.
- Operate the motor at idle speed.
- Turn off any other sound producing equipment or accessories.
- Open the windows and listen for a train's horn.

7. Non-emergency response

When responding to a call in a non-emergency response mode or normal flow of traffic, operate the vehicle with no audible or visual warning devices and in compliance with all state motor vehicle laws that apply to civilian traffic.

8. Ordinary travel procedures

Obey all traffic laws and traffic control devices when driving any organization vehicle under ordinary travel conditions.

9. Riding policy & Seatbelts

The organization requires all persons riding in an organization vehicle to be seated in approved riding position and secured to the vehicle by seat belts whenever the vehicle is in motion. The emergency vehicle driver and/or the person riding in the right front seat will verify that personnel are seated properly in seat belts before the vehicle is moved. Standard communication signals should be formulated and utilized by all personnel.

The organization prohibits riding on tail steps, sidesteps, running boards or any other exposed position. Personnel who perform medical care while an ambulance vehicle is in motion should be secured to the vehicle by a seat belt or safety harness designed for occupant restraint. If personnel providing medical care need to undo their restraint device, they should notify the driver before undoing the restraint.

Except for sanctioned ride-along, vehicle response should not occur with non-members in the vehicle (this includes, family, friends, and children).

10. Backing

The organization recognizes that backing emergency vehicles is made hazardous by the fact that the driver cannot see where he/she intends to go. The organization recommends that whenever possible avoid backing. When backing is necessary, use one of the following measures:

- The organization's first choice of backing procedures is to have a spotter in place near the rear of the vehicle before the vehicle is put into reverse and backed. It is important the spotter is safely positioned so the emergency vehicle driver can see them at all times. If at any time the emergency vehicle driver loses sight of the spotter, stop immediately until the spotter is visible again.

- If conditions exist that make use of spotters impossible, complete a circle of safety before attempting to back up any organization vehicle to assure that no person or persons are directly behind the vehicle or in its intended path of travel; all equipment is secured; all compartment doors are closed securely; any physical obstructions are moved out of the way. Also, note any potential obstructions in the intended path of travel.
- For ambulances with a 2-person crew where the responder in the patient compartment is engaged in patient care, if possible, have the responder look out the rear window of the ambulance to provide guidance. For ambulances with 3 or more responders, if all responders are not involved in patient care, have a responder positioned at the rear of the vehicle as a spotter.
- Many vehicles are outfitted with a camera at the rear of the vehicle however, these cameras should not be relied on as a replacement for a spotter. The camera may not observe an object moving into the path of the backing vehicle.

11. Rollover Prevention

All emergency vehicles are susceptible to rollovers, but tankers (tenders), pumper tankers, aerials, and ambulances are particularly vulnerable because of their high center of gravity. To help regain control of a vehicle that drops off the road surface the driver should:

- Take their foot off the accelerator and allow the vehicle to slow down gradually.
- Use soft application of the brakes, natural deceleration and downshifting to bring the vehicle to a safe speed or complete stop.
- Under soft shoulder conditions, feather the accelerator as needed to help maintain control of the vehicle slowing.
- Once the vehicle has been stopped or been brought down to a safe speed, gently steer the vehicle back onto the road surface using a lower gear and/or feathered acceleration to assist in overcoming the surface drop off or soft shoulder.

12. 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 as 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

Many states permit the use of courtesy lights for volunteer responders; however, rules and regulations regarding the use of a courtesy light can vary, but most states require compliance with all driving laws. Your organization should research and include the applicable state courtesy light regulations in your SOP.

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.

13. Securing Vehicles

It is critical that organizations take proactive measures to help reduce the possibility of unauthorized use or theft of their vehicles and equipment. Consider the following to help ensure vehicles are secure.

- Leave a crew member with the vehicle when idling.
- Shut off the engine and remove the ignition key from any vehicle left unattended.
- Install a commercial anti-theft or keyless entry device, if possible.
- Lock vehicles, equipment, and exterior storage compartments, whenever practical.
- Secure vehicles and contents when not in service or out for repair.
- Secure vehicles when in the station.
- Leave bay doors closed/down.
- Lock station entrances.
- Remove items utilized to prop open doors.
- Install recorded video surveillance systems.
- Evaluate adequacy of exterior perimeter lighting to reduce secluded areas.
- Remove or trim vegetation to permit maximum visibility.
- Consider perimeter fencing around the station.

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 operating this organization's vehicles safely; and, will abide by all of the tactical and administrative operating guidelines and best practices contained in this document.

Signed _____

Date _____

Original - personnel file

Copy – driver

REFERENCES

- Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). (2011). Flight Crewmember Duties. (14 C.F.R. § 135.100). Retrieved from <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2011-title14-vol3/CFR-2011-title14-vol3-sec135-100>
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- National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA). (2021). NFPA 1500: Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health. Retrieved from <https://www.nfpa.org/codes-and-standards/all-codes-and-standards/list-of-codes-and-standards/detail?code=1500>