

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Distracted Driving – “Sterile Cab”

Over six million motor vehicle crashes were reported in the United States in 2014. Approximately 28 percent of these resulted in injury or death. ¹ National safety organizations, governmental entities, and several other industries studying these vehicle crashes have reported consistent findings related to these accidents; and, all have found that distraction remains a primary cause.

Emergency Services Organizations (ESOs) are not immune to these incidents whether participating in emergency response or routine driving. Historically, emergency vehicles have had a degree of distraction built in by design and purpose. Two-way radio traffic, sirens, air horns, and flashing lights are just a few of the inherent obstacles of an ESO's daily operations.

The US Department of Transportation and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) collaborated in 2010 to create the NHTSA's "Driver Distraction Program." This program defines distracted driving as "a specific type of inattention that occurs when drivers divert their attention from the driving task to focus on some other activity instead." In 2014, 29,989 of the vehicle crashes that occurred in the United States were fatal, resulting in 32,675 people killed. Ten percent of those fatal crashes involved distracted driving. ¹

Human brains are susceptible to distraction any time the sensory system is stimulated. When distracted, the IQ of a Harvard MBA drops to the level of an eight year old. ² Therefore, we must control our environment to eliminate, or at least limit, the frequency and number of distractions when we are performing a critical task such as operating an emergency vehicle.

In 1981, the Federal Aviation Administration enacted two policies, FAR 121.542 and FAR 135.100, 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. ³ These types of activities include but are not limited to eating, non-essential conversation, and the use of non-flight related electronic devices such as cell phones. ³

ESOs should give considerable thought to adopting the sterile cockpit concept and create "sterile cabs" for their emergency vehicles. Some things to consider in this sterile cab environment are listed below:

- Do not use cell phones even if a hands-free device is available (this includes calls and texts).
- The driver should not use onboard two-way communications or warning devices unless no other crew member 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.

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

- 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 help identify 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.

It is recommended that ESOs include the sterile cab concept in their written policy and procedure. Adopting this approach will affirm the importance of the concept, ensure backing from upper management, and support the disciplinary process when needed.

Each ESO must consider their individual vehicle design and specific mission when adopting the sterile cab concept. No matter what agency changes are implemented, the concept and culture of safety will certainly be enhanced as a result of this mindset. By minimizing distractions, ESOs can improve their chances of safe arrival to a scene and maximize service to the citizens.

¹ National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2016, April). *Traffic Safety Facts: Distracted Driving 2014* [Research Note]. Retrieved from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812260>

² Pashler, H.E. (1999). *The Psychology of Attention*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

³ FAA Federal Aviation Rules, 14 C.F.R. § 135.100 (2011).