

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 area that requires a great deal of attention is the operation of emergency vehicles.

Chief officers and directors, as well as supervisors and 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 helps 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.

Review the following best practices and compare them to the organization's SOGs, state statutes and applicable standards. Prior to implementation, consider having legal counsel review the SOGs.

Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines

OPERATING GUIDELINES OF

Purpose

Responding to any emergency call, the _____ places a great deal of responsibility on the drivers of our emergency vehicles. Not only must you provide prompt conveyance of the vehicles, 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. 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). 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, it's important for emergency vehicles 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, 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, encircle the vehicles and visually inspect all four sides and the top of the vehicle before entering the cab. Also verify right side and rear clearance with the person riding in the officer 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.

2. Warning devices and true emergencies

When responding to a true emergency¹, 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.

3. Vehicle control and right-of-way

Attempt to maintain control of the vehicle being operated in such a manner as to provide the maximum level of safety for both the passengers and the general public. Be aware that the civilian vehicle operators may not react in the manner in which 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.

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.

Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines

Be aware of the rate of closure (comparison of time and space) on other vehicles and pedestrians at all times to make sure an appropriate approach speed and/or safe following distance is established and maintained. Adhere to the rule for safe following distance and 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.

4. Response speeds

When responding to a true emergency only, operate the vehicle at as close to the posted speed limit as possible, but not to exceed 10 mph miles 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

5. Intersection Practices

Take 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

Any intersection that does not offer a control device (stop sign, yield or 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 intersection.
- Avoid using the opposing lane of traffic if at all possible.

It's important for emergency vehicle drivers to be prepared to slow or bring their vehicle to a 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 they assume the right of way, therefore the emergency driver does not have the right of way until the other vehicle yields to them.

² Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines

• **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. 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 lights or yellow caution lights, 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 following³:
 - » When directed by a law enforcement officer
 - » Red traffic lights
 - » 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; 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, shall bring the apparatus or 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

³ NFPA 1500: Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health; 2013 Edition

Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines

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) operate the vehicle with no audible or visual warning devices and in compliance with all state motor vehicle laws that apply to civilian traffic. Follow motor vehicle laws for the use of emergency lighting equipment and audible warning devices.

7. Ordinary travel procedures

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 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 will verify that 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 avoid backing up. When necessary, use one of the two following measures:

- The department's first choice of backing procedures is that before any vehicle is put into reverse and backed, have a spotter in place near the rear of the vehicle. It is important the spotter is 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, stop immediately until the spotter is visible again.
- If conditions exist that make use of spotters impossible, make a circle of safety before attempting to back up any fire department vehicle 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. Also note any potential obstructions in the intended path of travel.

Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines

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's vehicles and will abide by all of the tactical and administrative operating guidelines contained in this document.

Signed _____ Date _____

Original - personnel file

Copy - driver