

Highway Incident Safety

Emergency Service Organizations (ESO's) respond to a wide variety of incidents involving operations on or near a highway. These operations pose special risks to personnel performing fire, rescue and EMS functions. Every year, a significant number of emergency service personnel are killed or injured while working to save others along our roadways. There may be a wide variety of reasons for these losses, but the point still remains: **they should never happen!** In many instances, an ESO responds to a "primary incident" along a highway, only to become the victim of a "secondary incident" – the nightmare in which a firefighter, EMS provider or police officer is suddenly struck and killed by traffic.

While no one individual or group can control drivers of other vehicles, there are some fundamental steps that may be taken by your organization to improve the level of safety at these types of incidents.

Highway Incident Safety Recommendations

- **There Is No Substitute For Training:** Incorporate proper equipment/apparatus placement and scene safety procedures into all training exercises. Provide feedback to all participants on proper and improper actions.
- **Multi-Agency Coordination and Communications Are A Must:** A Unified Incident Command Is Essential. All agencies that you routinely deal with should agree upon and practice with a common Incident Command System.
- **Identify Areas of Known High Incident Rates:** Be prepared and establish pre-incident plans for areas in your district that have high traffic incidents and/or where you routinely respond to other locations where you have to park or stage along busy roadways. Establish standard operating guidelines (SOG's) and routinely enforce them. SOG's should include, but not limited to response routes, apparatus and personnel placement, traffic diversion routes and site hazards.
- **Limit Your Exposure...Limit Your Time:** Do your job properly but do it with the minimum amount of equipment, personnel and lane restrictions necessary without jeopardizing the operation or personnel safety. Don't linger. Once you've finished wrap up and get off of the roadway as soon as possible.
- **Give Traffic Plenty of Warning:** Utilize signage, cones, flaggers, vehicles, anything to bring attention to your presence. Leave plenty of space as well. The speed and volume of the traffic as well as sight conditions will dictate how much space and warning is adequate.
- **Protect the Scene With Apparatus:** Proper placement of larger vehicles between moving traffic and your operation is key to providing a safety barrier for your personnel.
- **Always Work Away From The Traffic:** Keep personnel away from moving traffic. When possible do not use apparatus for blocking that will be heavily used during the operation. In other words don't use the rescue truck to block if personnel will be pulling equipment out of compartments on the traffic side of the vehicle.

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- **Be Prepared To Shut Down The Roadway:** If safety warrants it and there is no other way to provide a reasonable level of protection, don't hesitate to completely shut down the roadway. Always attempt to do this in conjunction with law enforcement. Keep the closure time to a minimum, keeping in mind you are creating other hazards by stopping or re-directing traffic, particularly on major roadways and interstates.
- **Be Seen and Not Hurt:** Keep the scene well lit so that you may be seen. However be aware that some of your scene lighting if improperly directed could reduce visibility of oncoming traffic. Turn off apparatus headlights and scene lighting that interferes with the passing vehicle operators ability to see.
- **Dress For The Occasion:** Be sure that all personnel have the appropriate protective clothing on at all times, including highly visible colors and reflective material.
- **Accountability Matters:** As with any emergency, knowing where your personnel are and what they are doing is important. Highway incidents are no different, except for one possible exception. Sometimes too many people on the scene will create additional exposure to injury. If too many people are just simply spectators and not actively involved in the incident, consider creating a staging area off of the roadway or releasing un-necessary personnel and equipment.

In order to insure that all of these safety points are being carried out consistently at the scene your organization should always have a Safety Officer present at highway incidents.