Getting Back to Basics: Safe Emergency Vehicle Operation

Emergency response services are the lifeblood of their communities, protecting and helping those in their time of need. However, sometimes in the rush to help, accidents occur. Many emergency vehicle accidents can be avoided with simple changes in behavior.

Selective's Safety Management can help your emergency response department stay safe while protecting the people you serve.

SELECTIVE®

Response is everything.

Safety Management

Solutions for a safer workplace®

Getting back to these basic best practices can help you safely operate your emergency response vehicles.

1. Driver Selection: *With age comes wisdom.*

Successfully operating an emergency vehicle requires experience and the improved decision-making ability that comes with age.

- Drivers should be at least 21 years old and have least five years experience.

2. Driver Qualification: *Better safe than sorry.*

Making sure that drivers are properly qualified before operating emergency vehicles can reduce the risk of vehicle accidents later.

- Driver medical evaluations should be obtained to check for health problems that could affect driving ability.
- Motor vehicle records (MVR) should be obtained for every new driver and reviewed annually for existing drivers.
- Station leadership should establish and clearly document criteria for satisfactory MVRs.
- As part of training orientation, drivers should complete a certified Emergency Vehicle Operators Course that meets state and/or National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards.

3. Driver Training: *We are what we repeatedly do.*

A formal driver training program is critical for reducing the risk of emergency vehicle losses.

- At a minimum, the training program should be administered by authorized trainers and include:
  - Supervision by an officer or driver training committee.
  - Ten hours or more of documented, behind-the-wheel training on each type/style of vehicle.
  - A documented final road test—with two or more instructors—that includes operating the emergency vehicle on a variety of roads and highways, with road conditions typical for the area.
  - Provisions for trainers to regularly observe and evaluate—for an extended time period—the trainee's ability to successfully maneuver the vehicle during emergency response calls before becoming the primary driver.
  - Annual refresher classroom and on-road training to ensure drivers remain familiar with the operation of their vehicles.

4. Response Procedures: *Response is everything.*®

To help reduce the risk of a vehicle accident during an emergency, response procedures should be developed and included as part of the department's vehicle safety program, including:

- Securing all equipment and compartments before moving the vehicle.
- Controlling vehicle speed so the emergency vehicle is not exceeding 10 mph over the posted speed limit.
- Adjusting vehicle speed for weather, road, and traffic conditions.
- Documentation for wrong way driving, using opposing lanes of traffic, driving through unguarded railroad crossings, and other potentially hazardous driving maneuvers.

5. Intersections: *Slow and steady wins the race.*

Intersections are common scenes of accidents, so extra caution must be taken by emergency vehicles.

- Laws may vary from state to state, but NFPA Standard 1500 and the International Association of Fire Chiefs recommend drivers adhere to the following tips:
  - Slow down before reaching the intersection; do not rely on the emergency warning devices to clear traffic.
  - Do not assume or force the right-of-way, and scan the intersection for possible driver and pedestrian hazards, as well as passing options.
  - Bring the vehicle to a full stop before entering a negative right-of-way intersection (red light, flashing red light, or stop sign), blind intersection, or any intersection where hazards are present or the driver cannot account for oncoming traffic.

6. Backing Policies: *Look before you leap.*

Backing accidents are a leading cause of damage to emergency vehicles, and simple spotting procedures can dramatically reduce the chances of one occurring. Clear guidelines for backing and spotting should be developed, including:

- Where feasible, when backing an emergency vehicle all non-driving personnel should dismount and act as vehicle spotters.
- At least one spotter should remain at the rear of the vehicle and be visible to the driver through the side mirrors.
- Standardized hand signals should be used to prevent confusion, and the emergency vehicle driver should respond to all signals given.
- To avoid a fatal injury or crash, the emergency vehicle driver should immediately stop if a spotter disappears from view.
- If alone, the driver should dismount and walk around the vehicle to observe possible hazards prior to backing.

7. Preventive Maintenance: *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*

Emergency vehicles need to be well maintained to insure they operate properly, and avoid costly problems from occurring.

- A formal preventive maintenance program should be developed including provisions for:
  - Creating maintenance forms, follow-up procedures, and standard operating procedures for reporting irregularities.
  - Performing maintenance at regular intervals based on time periods, service hours, fuel consumption, or other measures.
  - Documenting all maintenance performed for each emergency vehicle.

8. Accident Investigation: *Chance takers are accident makers.*

It is important to develop a process for investigating and recording all "near misses" and accidents involving emergency vehicles.

- Each occurrence should be investigated to determine the root cause so that reoccurrence of similar incidents can be reduced.
- The accident investigation process should supplement any local law enforcement investigations.
- Results from the investigation should be used to improve internal driver training and enhance preventative measures.

9. Securing Equipment: *Know safety, no injury. No safety, know injury.*

Equipment falling off emergency vehicles can injure or kill pedestrians or occupants of other vehicles. Falling equipment can also result in costly damage to property, as well as loss of valuable emergency response equipment.

- To reduce the risk, drivers should check that equipment is properly mounted and cannot become dislodged during vehicle travel.
- All installed safety devices used for securing equipment should remain on the vehicle at all times and be inspected at regular intervals for wear. Defective or worn devices should be immediately replaced.
- While the NFPA requires all new apparatus to be delivered from the manufacturer with hose and tool restraints, there is no requirement that older trucks be retrofitted with the same. Extra effort should be made to ensure all equipment is properly mounted and cannot become dislodged during travel.

10. Monitoring Equipment: *A picture is worth a thousand words.*

Installing devices such as "black boxes," cameras, and global positioning devices on emergency vehicles provides a way to observe unsafe driving behaviors and develop tailored driver-improvement training before an accident occurs.

Incorporating these and your own best practices into your emergency response department's standard operating procedures is invaluable to the safety of your crew, your equipment, and the communities you protect.

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