

Let's Get Started Safely
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Operating a fire truck or ambulance with lights and sirens is a dangerous task. Loud radios and soundproof cars reduce the effectiveness of sirens, inattentive drivers on cell phones or otherwise distracted don't see you, and still other drivers simply don't yield the right of way. Each year we see many first responders killed or severely injured in accidents involving responding emergency vehicles. There have been numerous articles written on the subject, research completed, training classes developed and yet, we continue to have issues navigating safely from point A to point B.

For the purpose of this article however, let's focus on point A, your station. Before you can get your vehicle out on the road, you must be able to safely exit the building you call home base, and that doesn't always go as planned. We strike doors before they are completely up and lower them before we are completely out. I've seen some cases where the driver simply goes through the door, forgetting to open it first. While these incidents usually don't result in injury, they do damage, cause embarrassing situations, and worst of all, they delay response.

Another common problem is when compartment doors are not closed and they strike things in the building. This can be especially problematic when they strike a vital structural part of the building. Even today, I am still amazed by the damage done by compartment doors which were not closed to the point of actual roof collapse. And most of the time these types of collisions don't simply delay the vehicle's response, they end it.

These types of accidents are completely preventable and policies and procedures should be put into effect to reduce the potential for open compartment incidents.

First, compartment doors should not be left open. It should become second nature for members who go into compartments while the vehicle is in the station to close the door before leaving it. Next, always be certain that the cab warning light indicating an open compartment is operating properly. If the bulb needs replacing or if the light is out for any other reason, maintenance should be made aware as soon as possible, and drivers must check for the light before putting the vehicle in gear. Checking this light should be part of the regular inspection program for all vehicles.

Finally, the most important thing to be done is for the driver to walk around the vehicle before getting into the cab. This is a great time to check for open compartment doors or anything near the vehicle which could cause an issue when leaving quarters. Walking completely around the vehicle looking up and down is vital since upper compartments with doors which open horizontal to the ground may be difficult to see from the front or rear of the vehicle. (See photos) This walk has been called the circle of safety, the ring of security, and several other catchy phrases, but it is the most important thing you will do to get your vehicle on its way to assist someone in need.



It is fairly easy to see that a compartment door is open in the photo on the left, but without walking around the entire vehicle it is more difficult to see the upper compartment open on the right. Driven out of the building, this door could cause major damage by hitting the support next to the bay door. (Thanks to the Cortlandville, NY Fire Department for this demonstration)

Once you get the vehicle on the road, hazards can be found everywhere, but taking those extra seconds to be certain your vehicle is ready to leave the building could make a big difference in the outcome of your response.