

BACKING THE APPARATUS...A DANGEROUS ASSIGNMENT

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Putting your fire apparatus in reverse seems to be a very dangerous move. A report by the International Association of Fire Chiefs indicated that 16% of all reported emergency vehicle accidents involved backing the apparatus. This is an extremely high number since many backing accidents go unreported. Most of the time, damage is minimal since the vehicle is travelling a low rate of speed; however the results of such an accident can be catastrophic. The majority of all backing accidents involve the vehicle striking a fixed object such as a pole, guardrail, parked vehicle or the fire station door. We tend to sometimes look at these types of accidents as minor in nature and not to take them too seriously. If your department is having a frequent number of these types of incidents, remember that the object struck could also be a child on a tricycle, a baby carriage, or an elderly person unable to move away quickly. As a result, you must take a pro-active stance to reduce such accidents.

First, decide whether you need to back the apparatus at all. If you do not need to back up...don't. Go around the block if at all possible. When parking, position the vehicle so you will not need to back up when you leave. Always look into the option of going forward before attempting to back up.

If you must back up, always use a spotter if one is available. With the advent of enclosed cabs, members sometimes would rather not step outside in the cold or wet weather. This is not an excuse, spotters are mandatory. Look at it this way...you would never drive the apparatus forward if there were a blanket covering the windshield and you could not see. But everyday, emergency vehicle drivers back their rigs in this exact condition.

The driver's window should always be open while backing so as to hear verbal warnings from the spotter. Do not begin to back until the spotter is in place and visible in the driver's mirror. Make sure that both the driver and the spotter understand both the hand and verbal signals that will be used. After the spotter has had the opportunity to check the rear of the vehicle for obstructions and overhead clearances, proper hand and verbal signals should be given to the driver to begin moving at a very slow rate of speed. Should the spotter go out of the mirror, the driver should stop the vehicle immediately.

If no spotter is available, and the vehicle must be backed, the driver should walk completely around the apparatus checking for obstacles including overhead clearances to the rear and on both sides of the vehicle. Proceed slowly, using caution at all times.

As with any other facet of fire service management, a policy on backing the apparatus should be developed covering all of the items previously mentioned. This should include hand and verbal signals. And finally, no matter how minor, backing accidents should be investigated in accordance with your department's accident investigation policy. There is a tendency to forego investigations since the damage was so minor, but the next time you might not be so lucky.

Backing accidents are preventable in almost all cases. Use common sense. It's too late when you hear a thud or even worse...a scream. Drive safely.