

Reducing Fire Apparatus Intersection Accidents
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A few years ago, while teaching an EVOC class, I asked the students if motorists always pulled to the right and stopped as the emergency vehicles approached intersections. There was about five minutes of laughter and over half an hour of “war” stories about what people do when they meet an emergency vehicle with its lights and sirens operating at an intersection. The room turned suddenly somber when I asked “if you know this, then why did your organization have 23 intersection accidents in the last two years.” The fact of the matter is that people simply do not know what to do when confronted by an emergency vehicle. Add that to the fact that due to air conditioning and stereo systems, their first warning of your vehicle comes moments before your paths will cross. The motorist, who encounters this situation so rarely, now must make split second decisions on where to go and what to do. All too often, their decision is not what we anticipate and the result, is usually an intersection accident.

The NFPA tells us that Fire Department vehicles are involved in nearly 15,000 accidents annually in the United States. These accidents result in 25% of all firefighter line of duty deaths and 1,300 firefighter injuries. Their report does not mention civilian death and injury, but just consider the size and weight factors and use your imagination. Non Fire Department ambulances are not included either.

Much has been written about lights, sirens, and even the color of the apparatus, but the bottom line to reducing intersection accidents is to drive defensively. Stop at all intersections where you have a red light or stop sign, and proceed only when you are absolutely certain that all cross traffic has stopped and granted you the right of way. Treat each lane on multiple lane roads as a separate intersection and until you know all traffic is stopped, do not cross that line. We take very seriously the lives of the people we protect, let's not cause undo harm while we try to do our job.

What is defensive driving? Unfortunately too many of us believe that means changing the sound of the siren, pulling as far to the left as possible, or flashing our headlights faster. The National Safety Council defines defensive driving as “driving to save lives, time, and money in spite of the conditions around you and the actions of others.” If we all drove in this manner, we could severely cut down on our accidents that occur at intersections.

Let's look at the use of sirens. Do we sound like an emergency vehicle coming down the road or something out of "Star Wars?" The NFPA recognizes standard J1849 of the Society of Automotive Engineers or SAE. The SAE approves only of "Manual, Wail, and Yelp" as sounds for requesting the right of way. Other sounds such as "Hi-Lo or Phaser" are not recognized and should not be used. These sounds serve only to confuse the driving public and the use of them could prove negligence on the part of the Emergency Organization in a court of law. If we stick to the same sounds, they will recognize an approaching emergency vehicle quickly and have more time to take action, such as pulling to the right or coming to a stop at an intersection. Confusion is not our friend, let's eliminate it as best we can.

Also, when traveling on a limited access highway such as an Interstate, why use sirens? If the traffic is moving along at the speed limit, how much time is that siren going to save you? But think about the confusion it will cause to other drivers.

Next is lighting. The idea here is again, to let people know that you are an emergency vehicle and need the right of way. Too many lights can cause confusion, again, not our friend. White lights give the impression that they are always on the front of the vehicle and that's where they should be. White lights near or on the rear will only add to the confusion. Recent tests have shown that yellow is the color of choice for the rear of the vehicle. And when you get to your destination, don't leave lights on which will blind oncoming traffic. This practice presents a danger to every emergency worker on the incident scene, as we've seen all too often.

A pressing question is, "Do we really need those lights and sirens?"

Many times, while visiting fire departments and EMS stations, I would ride with the chief to a call and find that there was no actual emergency. Maybe it was a simple hospital transportation, or the fire had already been extinguished. Yet, in the distance I could still hear the sirens and air horns of any number of emergency vehicles looking for the right of way through controlled intersections. My question is, "Why?"

Every time we take the right of way, we also take risks. Are all of the motorists going to stop? If they do, are they going to be rear-ended. Your chances of being involved in an accident increase several times by running with lights and sirens.

A few years ago, a study was done in South Carolina where the ambulances were timed traveling from the scene to the hospital noting if lights and sirens were used or if the vehicle simply followed all traffic laws. It was discovered that the average difference in transport time was 43 seconds. What percentage of your hospital transports are there where 43 seconds means the difference between life and death? Probably a very small percentage when compared to the number of runs you make use of lights and sirens.

Not long ago a fire truck relocating to another station for mutual aid stand-by was using lights and sirens and drove through an intersection against a red light. They struck a car resulting in the death of three people. What was the reason for operating in an emergency mode? Would a few minutes delay actually have made a difference? It certainly would have to those three civilians.

So, in conclusion, drive defensively, use lights and sirens wisely, and when possible don't use them at all and follow normal traffic regulations. Intersection accidents kill.