

Safety Vests Save Lives
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The Federal Highway Administration has established a new standard (23 CFR 634) that requires the use of high visibility safety apparel for all workers who are working within the rights-of-way of Federal-aid highways. Basically the new rule requires all firefighters, medical personnel, police officers, highway workers, tow truck drivers etc. to now wear reflective clothing that will make it easier for motorists to see and identify them better in a variety of conditions found on the roadways.

If your department is anything like mine, when word of new standards requiring the use of high visibility safety vest came down you can bet the troops got all worked up. After all, first there was OSHA and NFPA we had to be concerned with and now terms like ANSI, FHA and MUTCD are starting to affect us. One of our members said "what the heck is next, the m-o-u-s-e standard?"

The next thing to hit our "in-boxes" were scores of emails on ideas of how to beat the requirements and ideas that maybe the new standards were not meant for us. After all, our state OSHA in New York had come out with a letter that they did not require the use of vests and turnout gear was sufficient. Next was an email from a gear manufacturer citing a study that suggested the vest provided no more visibility then standard turnout gear. Questions also were asked on if we even protected any "federal highways" and what happened when fighting a car fire with a "flammable" vest. Then there was the whole "break away" vs "non-break away" vests and the new NFPA 1901 requiring a vest for each seat of a truck so do we

buy vests and put on the truck or buy them and issue them to our members?

I set out at the Fire and EMS Expo in Baltimore to get some answers. What I found was a huge selection of vests available that appear to meet the standard that ranged in price from \$14 to \$85 a piece. There are vests with zippers, vests with velcro and vests with snaps. I found vests with lights, vests with radio pockets, vests with cell phone pockets and vests with whistles. I also found vests that were fire resistant and fire proof. And many of the vendors were more than glad to customize them for you. After all I don't own a t-shirt without a department name on it so why would I want my vest that way?

I learned a lot about vests and have a whole new respect for them. I remember driving upon an accident scene lately and realizing that I could not see the emergency people doing their job. I then thought of all the times I was on the scene of one of those calls and was probably not seen by motorists either. What could we possibly be thinking trying to find ways to beat, fight, or ignore the new standard? The only person it is meant to protect is us.

I had planned on leaving Baltimore with a new vest to meet the 23 CFR 634 that goes into effect 11/24/2008. Instead I left with four! The t-shirts will have to wait another year.

Please research, plan and buy vests for your department. I don't like being told what to do anymore than anyone else does. But after researching this topic, I have to agree it is in our best interests. Also remember that the vest is just one small component of a complete highway safety program. McNeil and Company stands ready to assist you with training, sample SOP's and ideas to implement traffic

safety programs. Together we can make the roadways a safer place for our responders.