

Emergency Vehicle Response Guidelines

In today's commercial ambulance services, there is a growing need for the development and use of standard operating guidelines and issue specific training. One area that requires a great deal of attention is the operation of vehicles in emergency mode.

Emergency vehicle response is the basis for the success or failure of all other emergency functions. These expensive vehicles carry the emergency equipment in addition to personnel and patients. Having sound emergency vehicle response guidelines in place helps assist the organization in providing sound direction to drivers.

The following guidelines may be used to implement, supplement or enhance the emergency vehicle response policies and provide the basis for emergency vehicle driver training for most organizations. It is important to review these best practices and compare them to the organization's SOGs, state statutes and applicable standards. Prior to implementation, consider having legal counsel review the SOGs.

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Purpose

Responding in emergency mode, the _____ places a great deal of responsibility on our drivers. Not only must you provide prompt conveyance of the vehicles, equipment and personnel to provide service to those in need, but as importantly, must accomplish this task in the safest and most prudent manner possible. As an emergency vehicle driver in our organization, you have in your care, custody and control most of the major assets possessed by this organization (the vehicle, portable equipment, personnel).

Emergency vehicle drivers also have a higher standard of care to provide to the general motoring public and must make every attempt possible to provide due regard for the safety of others. Drivers must constantly monitor and reduce the amount of risk and exposure to potential losses during each and every response. Safe arrival at the destination remains the first priority of all vehicle drivers. In order to accomplish this enormous task, it's important for emergency vehicle drivers to become familiar with, and abide by the following policies and procedures.

Procedures

1. Circle of safety

Prior to entering the cab and starting the vehicle, make a circle of safety around the vehicle to see that all equipment is secured, all compartment doors are closed securely and any physical obstructions are moved out of the way. During the circle of safety, visually inspect all four sides and the top of the vehicle before entering the cab. Also verify right side and rear clearance with the person riding in the passenger position. Do this prior to moving the vehicle regardless of whether or not the vehicle is about to leave on an emergency or non-emergency.

2. Warning devices and true emergencies

When responding to a true emergency,¹ audible and visual warning devices will be operated at all times regardless of time of day and/or traffic conditions. Understand that warning devices are not always effective in making other vehicle operators aware of your presence. Warning devices only request the right-of-way, they do not assure the right-of-way.

3. Vehicle control and right-of-way

Attempt to maintain control of the vehicle in a manner that provides the maximum level of safety for both the passengers and the general public. Be aware that civilian vehicle operators may not react in the manner that is expected or felt to be appropriate. Make an attempt to have options available when passing or overtaking vehicles. If another vehicle operator fails to yield the right-of-way to an emergency vehicle, the emergency vehicle driver cannot force the right-of-way, nor can they assume the right-of-way, therefore, they do not have the right-of-way until the other vehicle yields to them.

Be aware of the rate of closure (comparison of time and space) on other vehicles and pedestrians to make sure an appropriate approach speed and/or safe following distance is established and maintained. Adhere to the rule for safe following distance and allow one second of following distance for every 10 feet of vehicle length for speeds under 40 mph and add one additional second for each 10 mph for speeds over 40 mph.²

¹A true emergency is defined as a situation in which there is a high probability of death or serious injury to an individual or significant property loss and actions by an emergency vehicle driver may reduce the seriousness of the situation. - [U.S. Fire Administration Emergency Vehicle Safety Initiative](#)

² Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration www.fmcsa.dot.gov/

4. Response speeds

When responding to a true emergency only, operate the vehicle at as close to the posted speed limit as possible, but not to exceed 10 mph over the posted speed limit, conditions permitting. Examples of conditions requiring slower response speeds include but are not limited to:

- Slippery road conditions
- Inclement weather
- Poor visibility
- Heavy or congested traffic conditions
- Sharp curves

5. Intersection Practices

Take extreme care when approaching any intersection as they are the locations responsible for a large percentage of major accidents involving emergency vehicles. Drivers are required to practice the organization's intersection operating guidelines during emergency responses.

Controlled intersections

Any intersection controlled by a stop sign, yield sign, yellow traffic light or a red traffic light requires prudent action by the emergency vehicle driver. Consider the following steps:

- Do not rely on warning devices to clear traffic.
- Scan the intersection for possible hazards (right turns on red, pedestrians, vehicles traveling fast, etc.) and driver options.
- Begin to slow down well before reaching the intersection and cover the brake pedal with the drivers' foot. Continue to scan in four directions (left, right, front, back).
- When approaching a traffic signal, be aware of "stale" green lights or yellow caution lights, begin to slow and prepare to stop as these will be turning red.
- Change the siren cadence not less than 200' from the intersection.
- Scan the intersection for possible passing options (pass on right, left, wait, etc.). Avoid using the opposing lane of traffic if at all possible. Consider using the lane of least resistance that is consistent with your intended direction of travel.
- During emergency response, bring the vehicle to a complete stop for the following:³
 - When directed by a law enforcement officer
 - Red traffic lights
 - Stop signs
 - Negative right-of-way intersection
 - When the driver cannot account for visible traffic in the lanes of traffic in an intersection
 - When other intersection hazards are present
 - When encountering a stopped school bus with flashing warning lights
- Establish eye contact with other vehicle drivers, have partner communicate all is clear, and reconfirm all other vehicles are stopped.
- Account for traffic one lane at a time, treating each lane of traffic as a separate intersection.

³ A Research Study of Ambulance Operations and Best Practice Considerations for Emergency Medical Services Personnel. Boon, C.M., Avery, L.W. & Malone, T.B. (2014). www.dhs.gov

Uncontrolled intersections

For any intersection that does not offer a control device (stop sign, yield or traffic signal) in the direction of travel of the emergency vehicle, complete the following:

- Scan the intersection for possible hazards (right turns on red, pedestrians, vehicles traveling fast, etc.).
- Observe traffic in all four directions (left, right, front, rear).
- Slow down if any potential hazards are detected and cover the brake pedal with the driver's foot.
- Change the siren cadence not less than 200' from the intersection.
- Avoid using the opposing lane of traffic if at all possible.

Railroad intersections

When approaching an unguarded rail crossing, bring the vehicle to a complete stop before entering the grade crossing. In addition, perform the following prior to proceeding:

- Turn off all sirens and air horns.
- Operate the motor at idle speed.
- Turn off any other sound producing equipment or accessories.
- Open the windows and listen for a train's horn.

6. Non-emergency response

When responding to a call in a non-emergency response mode or normal flow of traffic (non-code 3 or when not responding to a true emergency), operate the vehicle in compliance with all state motor vehicle laws that apply to civilian traffic. Follow motor vehicle laws for the use of emergency lighting equipment and audible warning devices.

7. Ordinary travel procedures

Obey traffic laws and traffic control devices when driving organization vehicles under ordinary travel conditions. Any driver observed breaking any traffic laws or driving any vehicle in an aggressive manner will be subject to disciplinary action, including suspension of driving privileges.

8. Riding policy

The department requires all persons riding in vehicles to be seated in approved riding positions and secured to the vehicle by seat belts whenever the vehicle is in motion. Personnel who perform emergency medical care while the vehicle is in motion should be secured to the vehicle by a seat belt or safety harness designed for occupant restraint. Except for sanctioned ride-alongs, emergency vehicle response should not occur with non-members in the vehicle (this includes family, friends, and children).

9. Backing

The department recognizes that backing emergency vehicles is hazardous because the driver cannot see much of where he/she intends to go. The department recommends to avoid backing up, whenever possible. When necessary, use one of the two following measures:

- The organization's first choice of backing procedures is to have a spotter in place near the rear of the vehicle before the vehicle is put into reverse and backed. It is important the spotter is positioned safely so the vehicle driver can see them at all times. If at any time the vehicle driver loses sight of the spotter, stop immediately until the spotter is visible again.
- If conditions exist that make use of spotters impossible, make a circle of safety before attempting to back up any vehicle to see that no person or persons are directly behind the vehicle or in its intended path of travel, all equipment is secured and all compartment doors are closed securely, and any physical obstructions are moved out of the way. Also note any potential obstructions in the intended path of travel.

Acknowledgment

I _____ acknowledge that I have received a copy of the _____ Emergency Vehicle Response Plan and have also been trained and understand the items and instructions contained in the policy. I also understand the importance of safe operation of this organization's vehicles and will abide by all of the tactical and administrative operating guidelines contained in this document.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Original - personnel file
Copy - driver

DISCLAIMER: This is a sample guideline furnished to you by Glatfelter Commercial Ambulance. Your organization should review this guideline and make the necessary modifications to meet your organization's needs. The intent of this guideline is to assist you in reducing exposure to the risk of injury, harm or damage to personnel, property and the general public. For additional information on this topic, contact our Risk Control Representative at 800.233.1957.

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