

LESSONS LEARNED

A View from the Inside Intersection Accidents

Emergency responders have a strong sense of community — most of whom join their local department or embark on a career in emergency services to help people. This is one of the attributes that makes them special. Many VFIS associates are emergency responders and are proud to support other emergency responders across North America.

This column was created to provide readers with a “view from inside emergency service organizations” and help all of us learn from unfortunate incidents that others have had to face. Hopefully this will offer insights into how emergency responders can better protect each other and the community served.

Safely negotiating intersections is a major obstacle when responding to an emergency. The costs (fatalities, serious injuries, department reputation, poor morale/suffering among the membership and damage to vehicles) resulting from intersection accidents involving emergency vehicles is significant.

A Google search for “emergency vehicle intersection accidents” returns 874,000 results. As an example: The ambulance, with lights and sirens was transporting a female patient with a head injury from a vehicle accident. The ambulance entered the intersection on a red light. Intersection traffic was stopped, so the driver moved left of center to pass the stopped traffic in front of him. While failing to substantially reduce speed, the driver moved back to the right lane and struck a vehicle that had entered the intersection from the right on the green light. The end result: the driver of the other vehicle was seriously injured; the passenger in the other vehicle was killed; the ambulance driver was not injured, but the two EMS providers in the patient compartment suffered fractures; the patient being transported suffered only minor injuries.

Unfortunately, this type of accident happens nearly every week. The driver of the other vehicle should have yielded the right of way to the ambulance, but anyone who drives an emergency vehicle can probably relate a story where another driver did not see or hear the emergency vehicle. First responders can’t control what other drivers do on the road, but certainly CAN control how they operate an emergency vehicle. Understanding “perception of presence” (other vehicle drivers must perceive the presence of the emergency vehicle visually or audibly before they can react) is key to safe operation of an emergency vehicle.

To keep from becoming a Google search result and help avoid intersection accidents, the following tips are provided for safely navigating intersections:

- Do not rely on warning devices to clear traffic (if other drivers don’t see and/or hear the vehicle, they can’t react properly).
- Scan the intersection for possible hazards (right turns on red, pedestrians, vehicles traveling fast, etc.) as well as driver options.
- Slow down well before reaching the intersection and “cover the brake.”
- Change the siren cadence not less than 200’ from the intersection.
- Scan the intersection to assess options (pass on right, left, wait for clearing, etc.).
- Avoid using the opposing lane of traffic if at all possible.
- During emergency response, be prepared to bring the vehicle to a complete stop for any of the following:
 - When directed by a law enforcement officer.
 - Red traffic lights.
 - Stop signs.
 - Negative right-of-way intersection.
 - When the driver cannot account for traffic in all lanes of traffic in an intersection.
- Establish eye contact with other vehicle drivers; have partner communicate all is clear; reconfirm all visible traffic is stopped.
- Account for traffic one lane at a time treating each lane of traffic as a separate intersection. 🌟

Intersections



Operation Safe Arrival

Part of the Safety and Risk Management Video Series



Want more information or assistance in properly handling intersections?

VFIS has an intersection training program available as a DVD/CD set at shop.vfis.com or drivers can complete an intersection safety class through VFIS Distance Learning.

Find downloadable Risk Bulletins on intersection safety at vfis.com that can help develop, enhance or evaluate current procedures.