Emergency vehicle operations: Roadway command

Evaluating and possibly making some changes can ensure a safe, smooth, and expedient response

Editor's note: *This is the first of a three-part series on emergency vehicle operations, which will include roadway command, intersection analysis, and vehicle placement.*

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You are responding down a main street in the middle of the afternoon; traffic is moderate and some traffic is yielding the right-of-way and some is not. It is hard to understand why people just will not get out of your way when you are trying to save a life and wonder if they would do this if it was their family member in the back of your ambulance.

There is a list of reasons why this happens — everything from better-designed and quieter automobiles to the physical limitations of other drivers to just plain not paying attention to his or her surroundings (get off the phone!). But we as a service are not without blame and this is something we can address.

Evaluating and possibly making some changes can ensure a safe, smooth, and expedient response. Let's look at some of the issues that we can change.

Body language
We all know that vehicles are supposed to pull to the right and stop in both directions when an emergency vehicle is approaching; but is the emergency vehicle giving the proper signals to the surrounding vehicles or are we sometimes confusing them?

Are you expecting vehicles to pull to the right and, because of traffic conditions, you are also forced into the right lane? The car in front of you is really confused: "Should I jump the sidewalk? Should I pull to the left? Maybe I'll just stop short and let them go around me?"

Most of the time, we need to hold our ground and remain as close to the center of the road as possible. By staying as close to the center line as possible without crossing gives a clear message to all vehicles to pull to the right.

Notice of Approach
Notice of Approach is part of your state's VTL and requires all fire and EMS units using lights and siren to give surrounding traffic the ability to *Recognize*, *Process* and *React* to

them, and 1.6 seconds is generally the standard used to measure a person's reaction time while driving.

Vehicles must yield the right of way when emergency vehicles approach with ALL warning devices FULLY engaged, but they can't yield the right of way if you don't give them proper Notice of Approach.

Two-way streets
When traveling down a two-way street, you want to maintain a position that puts you as close to the center line without crossing over it. The right lane is confusing and dangerous to both you and the surrounding traffic. Some of the pitfalls to being in the right lane are:

- Double parked cars
- Car doors opening
- Pedestrians stepping out between vehicles
- Traffic to your left blocking you in

When traffic blocks your forward progress, your state's VTL allows you to use exemptions such as crossing left of center. This exemption is only to be used for the duration of the need and must be used with Due Regard and usually does not provide immunity in the event of a collision.

When crossing left of center, the EVO must reduce the vehicle's speed to 20 mph, for several reasons:

- Increases the time/distance that your siren travels
- Increases the time/distance that other vehicles have to Recognize, Process and React to you
- Decreases the closing speed of two opposing vehicles
- Decreases the speed of impact if there is a collision

When traveling down a road that has a center turn lane for both directions of travel to make a left, it is tempting to use this as your own emergency response lane. But the laws don't recognize that and you must remember that when driving in this lane your vehicle is considered to be left of center and all rules of exemption apply.

You must use extreme caution when driving in this lane, as you have traffic coming from several different directions; vehicles heading toward you may have their view blocked and may pull into your path of travel wanting to make a left turn into a parking lot, or someone from the parking lot on your right may pull out into the lane as everyone else has slowed down or stopped for you, or even someone heading in the same direction may pull in front of you to make a left turn.

One-way streets
One-way streets, both residential and downtown areas have certain benefits and

limitations for the EVO responding to an assignment. When responding on a one-way street, the best place to be is in the center of the road.

This allows traffic to pull over to both sides of the road. One-way streets are the one place that safely allows traffic to yield by pulling to the left. Stay away from the curb lines on both sides of the street for the same reasons stated above.

Wider one-way streets may have a designated "FIRE LANE" in the middle that should be utilized whenever possible. By being in this lane, you are able to either make a right or left turn around traffic or maneuver safely past any stopped traffic or pedestrians.

Training

This is one of the hardest things to teach in an EVOC class and is usually left up to on the job field training which is never consistent, duplicable or safe. Simulation training takes all that into account and can create a rich interactive environment that can be driven and reviewed repeatedly. Simulation training improves driver training programs by enhancing real world experience and accelerating the learning process.

Summary

Learn to take control of the roadway and always remember that the center of the road is usually the safest part and if a simulator is available it is the best way to train your drivers in roadway command.

Be safe, and drive like your life depends on it.

About the author:

Robert Raheb has been in the EMS field for 31 years and currently is the emergency response subject matter expert for FAAC, Incorporated. As a Firefighter in California, he became a paramedic working in NYC for 27 years and a NYS Instructor Coordinator for 21 years. Introduced to simulation training in 2003, Rob Raheb discovered he had an intuitive skill creating effective simulator training curricula. Realizing the benefits and potential training abilities this high-tech tool held, simulation training has added a new and exciting dimension to his vehicle training program and those benefits were obtained with a 38 percent reduction in intersection collisions within the first year and a steady decline every year since. Robert can be reached at rob@faac.com