

Using Advance Warning Signs to Reduce Secondary Incidents Monday, June 06, 2011

The Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association Emergency Responder Safety Institute (ERSI) supports the policy that emergency vehicles should carry an advance warning sign. In 2009 ERSI requested comments from readers on advance warning strategies following a series of rear end collisions to emergency vehicles at a number of locations around the country. We received considerable input which led to a decision to study Advance Warning for Emergency Responders.

One such incident in Huron OH is examined in detail in the article following this demonstrates that while injuries were prevented when the blocking vehicle was struck the resulting accident could well have been tragic. (See article and photos - Huron Township OH FD)

Currently ERSI and its partners the Montgomery County MD Fire and EMS Department and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation are studying advance warning strategies along Interstate Highways 270 and 495 part of the Washington DC beltway system. The study will result in a training program for fire departments on how to deploy the signs safely with the goal to reduce secondary traffic incidents.

Director of Training Jack Sullivan is a member of the National Committee that drafts the Federal Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). Recently members of the 6-I Committee, who is responsible for temporary traffic control, have begun talking about the use of signs by emergency responders.

Director Sullivan wrote in part to the Chairman of the committee, "Safety, training and command personnel in the fire service are aware of, and have in many cases, tried to comply with, the standard for "Emergency Scene Ahead" signs in fluorescent pink with black text as described in the MUTCD. The Emergency Responder Safety Institute has emphasized this type of sign and advance warning for the last 10+ years. We support the use of a sign that says "Emergency Scene Ahead" because it covers any type of incident we might respond to; fire, medical assist, traffic crash, hazmat spill, search and rescue, technical rescue or whatever. It is flexible, simple, clear and easily understood by motorists who are paying attention."

There is trend in progressive FDs to carry and deploy a single compliant sign. Storage space on older apparatus and limited staffing make the use of advance warning problematic at best. Nonetheless many departments recognize advance warning signs can and will reduce secondary traffic incidents and have developed creative solutions. The study now underway in Montgomery County MD will showcase some of these solutions.

Law Enforcement agencies indicate that signs and even cones on board police cars in some departments are generally difficult due to space limitations. Dodge Chargers and Chevy Impalas are usually identified as having smaller trunks than the former Ford Crown Vic which is being phased out. The goal should be to carry one compliant sign and cone (s) if possible.

ESRI prides itself in advancing forward thinking safety measures that protect emergency responders on the highway. We often take courageous positions opposing unsafe practices many of which are steeped in culture and engrained in the emergency services. As responders we understand that some proposals are not always easy, but we are convinced advance warning can and will save lives. We urge our readers to explore the use of these signs in their departments.

Position of the Emergency Responder Safety Institute on the Use of Advance Warning Traffic Signs

The CVVFA Emergency Responder Safety Institute (ERSI) endorses the use of temporary traffic signs for advance warning at roadway incidents.

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 1500 - Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Programs current calls for the use of Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) compliant fluorescent and retro-reflective 48" x 48" signs stating "Emergency Scene Ahead" (with a directional arrow overlay). The recommended signs are fluorescent pink with black text as described in the 2009 Edition of the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). ERSI recommends the use of "Emergency Scene Ahead" signs for any incidents that will last more than 30 minutes. ERSI recommends using the sign wording described in NFPA 1500.

ERSI believes it is unnecessary to have multiple early warning signs on fire apparatus, ambulances, police cars or tow trucks. A single compliant sign is adequate for early traffic control at any type of emergency scene.

We support the use of additional signs and equipment for early warning that can be carried and deployed by DOT Service Patrols or Fire Police Traffic Units especially for incidents of over 30 minutes in duration.

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