

FIRE COUNSEL NOTES



Make Safe Operation of Vehicles a Priority

By John T. Brady

Earlier this year, a Rockford firefighter was charged with aggravated DUI and reckless homicide after the Pierce pumper he was driving collided with a much smaller Ford Focus automobile, killing the other driver. There are questions about what caused the accident. It is alleged that the firefighter was impaired due to cannabis (THC) in his system. Some evidence suggests that the pumper was travelling at excessive speed when the impact occurred, and witness statements differ about which driver had the green light. No trial has yet been held, and, consequently, the firefighter-driver is presumed to be innocent of the charges. In another incident this year, while returning from a call, a pumper from a fire department in northern Illinois left the roadway and rolled over. Four firefighters suffered minor injuries in the crash, and the apparatus was totaled.

One of these incidents described above involved a big city-fire department, and the other a smaller fire protection district. In one situation, the apparatus was on the way to an emergency; in the other, the pumper was on a routine return to quarters. Different situations, but both with unfortunate results. These examples are not meant to assess causes or assign blame. Rather, they suggest that vehicle mishaps can hit fire departments of all sizes and in all circumstances.

Such incidents are all too frequent. They are the second-leading cause of on-the-job deaths for firefighters; traffic incidents kill more firefighters than smoke, flames, or building collapses! So, apparatus accidents merit close attention from trustees, who should insure that

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all reasonable steps are being taken by command to reduce the likelihood of such incidents.

And what are these steps? Such steps likely fall into four categories: (1) Personnel who drive apparatus should be appropriately screened and evaluated for driving qualifications; (2) Drivers need to be properly educated and trained to operate apparatus; (3) Apparatus must be operated safely at all times; and (4) Apparatus must be timely and properly inspected and maintained.

(1) Personnel who drive apparatus should be appropriately screened and evaluated for driving qualifications.

The "hiring pool" of individuals seeking to become a firefighter is far smaller than it was even recently, and most volunteer fire departments are facing serious recruitment challenges. Without underestimating the seriousness of these challenges, trustees and command should put procedures in place to make certain that no one unqualified to drive ends up behind the wheel of department apparatus. A review of a candidate's past driving record and a thorough criminal background check are required.

Such checks should not be a "one and done" process. Traffic offenses and accidents can obviously occur at any point after initial hire, and drivers licenses expire with the passage of

time. Additionally, visual abilities tend to diminish as we get older, and illness/disease and other changes in physical condition can lessen a person's physical condition. These changes can negatively impact a firefighter's qualifications to drive apparatus. Department records and driving status must constantly be updated so that they always accurately reflect the current status of a firefighter's qualifications to drive.

Written procedures should be in place to describe the actions that the department can take if a serious violation of traffic laws occurs, and any disciplinary action indicated must, as with all discipline, be imposed on a fair and impartial basis.

(2) Drivers need to be properly educated and trained to operate apparatus.

The ability to safely operate a forty foot long, twelve foot high fire department tanker carrying 3,000 gallons of water speeding down the road to a fire scene requires significantly greater knowledge and a different set of driving skills than driving a 3,500 pound Chevrolet Volt on a leisurely Sunday outing. Yet, sometimes the drastic differences involved in these two situations are not sufficiently appreciated. Simply having a driver's license and a driving record free of convictions doesn't

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qualify someone to drive fire apparatus. Districts need to have a training program in place to give firefighters the skills and knowledge that they need to safely operate their vehicles. Fortunately, various insurance companies and professional organizations have "Emergency Vehicle Operator Courses" available to help with this task, including courses available through the Illinois Fire Service Institute.

As in other areas, training needs to be on-going; like every skill set, safe driving capabilities require continual updating. And in addition to the "classroom" component of the training, drivers should be continually evaluated over the course of time.

(3) Apparatus must be operated safely at all times.

Sometimes, a culture of "everyone knows what to do" can creep into a fire department. There is no substitute for having good written procedures in place to guide firefighters as they perform their duties. Drivers must obviously be familiar with both the Illinois "Rules of the Road" and the exceptions to those rules applicable to driving in emergency situations. Department expectations regarding the operation of vehicles should be clearly spelled out.

Some of these expectations will apply to firefighter passengers, in addition to the driver. Seat belt use by firefighters is dangerously low. One study determined that out of 29 fatalities involving apparatus

drivers, only three of the drivers were using their seat belt/restraint systems. No apparatus should leave the station until all crew members have their seatbelts on and are following all necessary safety precautions.

The safe operation of vehicles goes beyond getting to and from the scene. The department should craft and implement a system of policies and procedures, for example, to address the protection of personnel and incident victims at highway incident scenes.

In addition to these issues, apparatus manufacturers may spell out "dos and don'ts" regarding the operation of their apparatus. These should be studied and pertinent information included in training provided to personnel.

Even if all these steps are taken, it is no guarantee that mishaps will not occur. The department should have a written process in place to investigate all mishaps and all serious "near miss" situations involving the department, to help identify steps that should be taken to prevent future incidents. This investigation should be separate from any investigation by law enforcement, which investigation would likely be focused on legal responsibilities and penalties.

And disciplinary action can be difficult in the event of an infraction if proof that a firefighter had knowledge of department expectations is lacking. As in other training situations, the department must maintain written records that show presentation of the information, the evaluation process, and verification of attendance by personnel.

(4) Apparatus must be timely and properly inspected and maintained.

The protection of firefighters and the public requires that all apparatus in service is safe to operate. A prerequisite to determining the safe status of apparatus is an inspection. Apparatus should be regularly inspected on a defined schedule. Some frequent (perhaps daily) inspections will be cursory and limited; other inspections will be more comprehensive. Some of these inspections can be as simple as a "walk-around" on return to quarters after a call, to determine if there are obvious deficiencies requiring attention. In every case, there should be a written inspection checklist, describing any deficiencies. If it is safety-related and sufficiently serious, the deficiency will mean that corrective action must be taken, or the vehicle taken out of service. Especially in smaller departments, this can be a drastic step. However, firefighter (and the public's) safety should not be compromised. Again, it will be important to provide written records to establish that an inspection was done, and whether any corrective action was indicated.

Following these steps above can reduce the risks inherent from the operation of fire apparatus. However, the steps only reduce, but not eliminate, the possibility of mishap. For this reason, in addition to these steps, appropriate insurance coverage, periodically reviewed and evaluated, is a must for every district. ■



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