10 Practical Tips for Responding and Operating on Roadway and Highway Incidents

Roadway emergency operations are the #1 traumatic risk firefighters and EMS responders face. Here's how to minimize the risk:

1. **Dispatch the Appropriate Apparatus**
   Make sure your response protocols establish ahead of time what fire apparatus will respond to highway incidents. Many fire departments send units to address the emergency as well as an extra unit to act as a safety block and/or advance warning. Some jurisdictions send units in both directions on divided highways where the actual location of the incident has not been confirmed. If on a divided highway, park only on same side of incident (if possible) to lessen risk to personnel.

2. **On-scene Positioning (blocking, safe positioning)**
   Personnel should be trained on appropriate positioning of fire/EMS apparatus at incident scenes. Apparatus should be parked on an angle for incidents involving multiple lanes (the shoulder counts as a lane!) and the driver/operator and company officer should collaborate to decide exactly where the first unit will park and at what angle—block right or block left. Remember to protect the pump operator at fire scenes. The first-in unit should provide instructions for other incoming units on where and how to position so the scene is managed from the very

beginning. Also, please keep in mind that the first arriving apparatus is often the one with the most risk; use extreme caution and situational awareness with size-up that continues throughout the incident. First large vehicle arrivals should not pull up too close to the scene in case it gets hit from behind. Driver should position wheels away from scene.

3. **On-scene Size-up Report**
   The fire officer on the first-in unit should give a size-up report that confirms the type of incident, the actual location, any obvious hazards (i.e., curves or hills that may block view for approaching traffic, downed wires, hazardous materials, adverse weather conditions such as fog or icy road surface, etc.) and indicate which lanes are affected by the incident or by the initial scene block. If the conditions observed on arrival indicate the need for additional agencies or resources to respond (law enforcement, safety service patrols, EMS or heavy rescue units etc.) request or confirm their response. Dispatchers should relay appropriate information to regional traffic operation centers and other responding agencies.

4. **Scene Safety**
   Be sure emergency lights are set up for scene safety. Turn off forward-facing white lights if not needed for operations (i.e., headlights and/or flashing white warning lights). In newer apparatus, this might happen automatically when the unit is put in park, but in older apparatus, the operator will have to manually control the emergency lights. Activate any traffic directional arrows on the apparatus. Be sure flood lights are set up to illuminate the work area as well as the area surrounding the apparatus roadway while not creating glare hazards for other motorists.

5. **Advance Warning/Temporary Traffic Controls** (TTC)
   Setting up advance warning for those approaching the emergency scene is critical. Follow your agency protocols for deploying flares and/or traffic cones upstream of the unit. Relay

commands to other responding units about deploying advance-warning signs or have dispatch relay to law enforcement, safety service patrols or transportation units responding on what temporary traffic controls will be needed. Be specific about which lanes are blocked or if all lanes are blocked and detours will be needed. Update all units and dispatch periodically throughout the incident on changing traffic conditions due to additional lanes being blocked or some lanes being opened up after operations are complete. If operating on both directions of travel for an incident in the median, set up advanced warning/TTC in both directions.

6. **Firefighter Safety**
   Make sure personnel are wearing appropriate PPE for the conditions on arrival; NFPA-compliant bunker gear for fire incidents or high-visibility gear if they are not potentially exposed to fire, heat, flame or hazardous materials. Train and remind personnel to dismount the apparatus with eyes wide open, on the side away from moving traffic if possible. Personnel should be wearing helmets with straps fastened for head protection and to be more visible on scene. If staffing permits, a safety officer should be designated to monitor scene safety measures and coordinate with other agencies on temporary traffic controls and proper positioning of other arriving units.

7. **Establish IC and/or Unified Command**
   Use agency protocols for incident command or unified command if multiple agencies and/or jurisdictions will be involved. Be sure that all agencies on scene are working with the same Incident Action Plan (IAP). The command post should be clearly indicated and the incident commander should be readily identifiable. Now is the time to set up meetings and training with all local law enforcement agencies to ensure a solid, working plan.

8. **Monitor and Adjust TTC**
   The incident commander will be responsible for temporary traffic controls if that duty has not been delegated to another agency or

safety officer. As the incident develops, there may be a need to adjust initial TTC arrangements. Of special concern will be motorists at the back of the queue or backlog who may be unprotected. Motorists on highways are not expecting to encounter stopped traffic unless advance warning has been established to advise motorists of an incident and traffic delays ahead. Motorists at the back of the queue are in danger of being struck by oncoming vehicles that cannot stop in time to avoid a secondary crash. Queue protection should be established to warn approaching traffic of the backlog ahead. Most often that responsibility is assigned to law enforcement and/or transportation agencies, but the incident commander must make sure that steps are taken to protect the back end of the queue. Other TTC measures might have to be adjusted during the duration of the incident and that responsibility should be specifically assigned to the most appropriate resource on scene. Examples include EMS helicopters responding to the incident and any landing zones established or weather conditions changing during the incident that might require additional scene lighting, advance warning or traffic control devices.

9. **Manage Non-involved Personnel**
   Almost every incident will involve some personnel who are not emergency responders, but who want to help or be involved in some way. News media personnel might arrive on scene of longer duration incidents. Nowadays, we need to deal with the "new media" which is virtually anyone with a smartphone, camera or drone. Family members who learn about an incident through official means or social media posts might arrive on scene (i.e., school bus incident with students on board). Other motorists in the area who are stopped in traffic might wander into the work area if not managed appropriately. Again, the duty of managing non-involved personnel should be delegated as appropriate given on-scene resources or it is the responsibility of the incident commander. Assign personnel to direct non-involved personnel to a safe area past the incident or behind a barrier, if possible, and restrict their movement around the incident scene.

Public Information Officers (PIO) can be assigned to interact with any news media personnel. Law enforcement should be involved with anyone who fails to cooperate with directions from emergency personnel. Manage the scene of incoming and outgoing emergency vehicles to protect responders who might not be expecting moving traffic around the scene, especially if the entire road is shut down.

10. **Incident Scene Demobilization**

The incident is under control, injured parties have been packaged and transported by EMS, damaged vehicles are being removed and units are starting to go back in service. The danger is over and scene safety measures are no longer a concern. Wrong! Demobilization time is very dangerous and must be managed appropriately to prevent secondary incidents. Any temporary traffic-control devices need to be removed in an organized manner. Advance warning should be the last to leave, especially if visibility is reduced due to topography or weather. Blocking units should remain in place to protect tow operators, law enforcement and others who might be the last to complete their assignments. Fire units need to notify the incident commander when they are ready to leave. Make sure all personnel are accounted for before units leave the scene. Notify dispatch when the scene is demobilized so they can advise traffic-operation centers and maybe the news media for their traffic reports.

SOURCE: The International Association of Fire Chiefs (January 13, 2020)