



The Dangerous Five

Steering Clear of Roadside Recovery Mistakes

By David Lewis,
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Editor's note: The following experience is an all-too-frequent tragedy, one that might have been prevented by practicing the safety procedures highlighted below.

Early in the evening of July 21, 2020, Tyler Laudenslager, a 29-year-old tow operator with H&S Towing in Halifax, PA, responded to a call for assistance from another tow operator. This routine call changed the course of Tyler's and his family's lives in a way that couldn't be anticipated. While working along the shoulder of I-78 in Bethel Township, PA, Tyler was struck and killed by a driver who was ignoring his surroundings. The driver was also found to have been driving while under the influence of drugs at the time of the crash.

Devastatingly, Tyler left behind his wife, newborn daughter, mom, sister, and many beloved friends. Sadly, this reality is not something unique to the Laudenslager family.

2019 - 2023 Struck-by-Vehicle Fatalities

Year	LEO	Fire/EMS	Tow Operators	Road Service Technicians	DOT/SSP	Total
2019	18	9	14	3	0	44
2020	17	4	21	1	3	46
2021	30	9	22	2	2	65
2022	17	11	18	4	1	51
2023	14	8	20	0	3	45
Totals	96	41	95	10	9	251



Emergency Responder
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The fatality statistics for tow operators are tragic, and demand serious attention.

According to ERSI (Emergency Responder Safety Institute) 95 tow operators were struck and killed from 2019 to 2023—an average of 19 per year. Investigators often narrow down the cause of these incidents to five key factors:

1. OMITTING TIM TRAINING

As our nation's roadways are busier and more congested than ever before, roadway incidents are just a part of everyday life. These incidents include vehicle crashes, disabled vehicles, debris in the roadway, or any other activity that impedes the normal flow of traffic. They pose a risk to the safety of both responders and the traveling public.

All incident responders, including law enforcement, fire departments, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) units, and towing and recovery operators must practice safe operating procedures. The core principles of Traffic Incident ►



TIM training is an essential aspect of tow operator safety.

Management must be studied and practiced by every responder group.

Traffic Incident Management (TIM) consists of a planned and coordinated process to detect, respond to, and clear traffic incidents so that traffic flow is restored as safely and as quickly as possible. The goals of the TIM program include improving the safety of responders and road users. It is recommended that all roadway responders complete a nationally recognized TIM training course. Some states even require TIM training for specific responders, including tow and recovery operators.

A TIM training course consists of modules covering recommended practices for scene assessment, safe vehicle positioning, on scene safety, traffic flow management, special considerations, and clearance and termination. The most effective training is conducted with a mixed responder group consisting of law enforcement, fire/EMS, towing & recovery, and service patrol personnel all training together. Integrated training

allows each responder to gain a better understanding of the other response groups' actions, needs, and concerns when operating at an incident scene.

Each state has assigned a TIM coordinator that can bring training to your local area. When possible, the training should include both classroom sessions and outdoor practical activities. Where classroom training is not possible, online training is available through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) or through the Responder Safety Learning Network (accessible through learning.respondersafety.com).

2. FAILURE TO ESTABLISH EARLY WARNING AND TRAFFIC CONTROL

Upon arrival at an incident scene, the responding unit must:

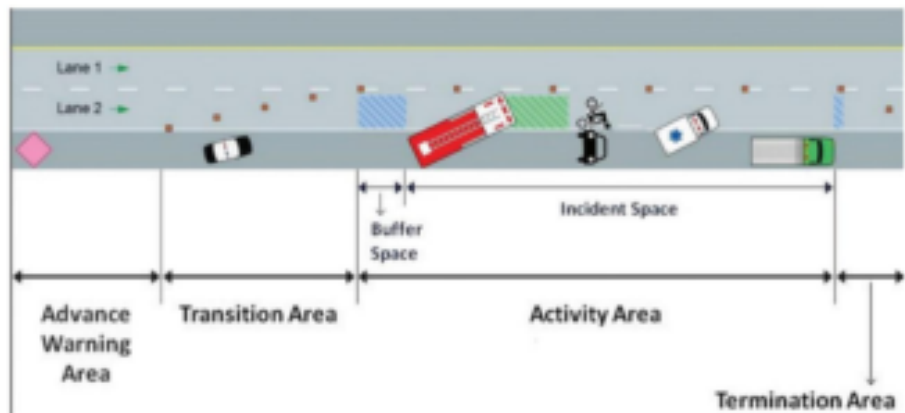
- a) Position their vehicle(s) in a manner that protects the responders that are performing their duties.
- b) Protect road users traveling through the incident scene.
- c) Minimize disruption to the flow of traffic.
- d) Use appropriate temporary traffic control devices (e.g., cones, flares, lights, signs) to establish a Traffic Incident Management Area (TIMA).
- e) Employ appropriate temporary traffic control devices to divert traffic away from the incident scene.

When multiple units are deployed to an incident scene (e.g. fire department, EMS, and tow trucks), the largest vehicle should be positioned as a blocking vehicle to protect the others working at the incident scene. Solo responders should establish a TIMA before beginning tow operations. When traffic conditions involve too much risk, contact the dispatcher and request a law enforcement or service patrol unit assist with ►

Internet Resources

The Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firefighters Association (CVVFA) was formed in 1901 by fire companies across a four-state region to address challenges related to operations and training. Today, CVVFA members span across the U.S., and continues to focus on responder safety. In 1998, the CVVFA organized the Emergency Responder Safety Institute (ERSI) to address the challenges of operating incidents along the nation's roadways. The ERSI has developed many technical reports addressing roadway safety, and hosts the Responder Safety Learning Network (RSLN) with a large collection of online learning modules to enhance safety for first responders when working roadway incidents. The RSLN can be accessed online at learning.respondersafety.com. Once registered, you may complete free training through any of 48 learning modules. The following are samples of training modules of particular interest to Towing and Recovery operators:

- The First 15 Minutes at Roadway Operations
- Advanced Warning
- Fire Service Collaboration with Towing and Recovery Operations
- Move It or Work It
- See and Be Seen: Emergency Lighting Awareness
- Traffic Incident Management on Rural Roads
- Traffic Incident Management: Model Practices and Procedures



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scene safety.

Effective traffic control equipment should be carried on the tow vehicles so that it can be quickly deployed when arriving at an incident scene. Joint planning and training with fire, law enforcement, and service patrol units will help establish partnerships to support each other at an incident scene.

3. POOR VISIBILITY

When working a roadway incident, always provide sufficient warning to oncoming vehicles that is clearly seen by approaching traffic. Visibility means having your vehicle clearly marked as a response vehicle, emergency lighting activated, and all roadside workers wearing appropriate high-visibility apparel.

A study conducted by the ERSI demonstrated that flashing lights alone do not provide enough warning to approaching vehicles. Absent of any marking or warnings, you appear as just another vehicle on the roadway and the approaching traffic may not even be aware that you are stopped.

The Manual for Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) requires that, "all workers, including emergency responders, within the right-of-way of a roadway who are exposed either to traffic (vehicles using the



Make sure motorists can see you clearly.

roadway for purposes of travel) or to work vehicles and construction equipment shall wear high-visibility safety apparel (HVSA)."

HSVA consists of a combination of fluorescent and retroreflective material to increase the visibility of workers along the roadway. Retroreflective material helps identify the wearer during nighttime activity, and fluorescent materials helps identify the wearer during daytime activity. It is essential that the apparel is both retroreflective and fluorescent.

It is also important to properly maintain apparel and replace it when it has become worn and dirty. When the apparel becomes deeply soiled, it loses its visibility features, and can no longer be seen by approaching traffic. The more visible the responder, the better the chance that the traveling motorist will slow down, move over, and avoid entering the work area.

4. TOO LITTLE OR TOO MUCH LIGHTING

As noted above, vehicle markings and lighting are important for warning motorists that your vehicle is working a traffic incident. Warning lights on vehicles are often governed by state laws that mandate their use for certain incident types, and also specify allowable colors for different types of response vehicles. As the standards and the technologies have evolved, response vehicles have been equipped with more lighting. The question to ask is "How much is too much?"

The introduction of LEDs provides both new opportunities and challenges for tow vehicle lighting. LEDs emit higher levels of lighting while using much less power and drain on batteries. These lights may be very effective during both daytime and response mode. However, when a tow vehicle is parked alongside or on a roadway at night, the lights may be blinding to approaching motorists, and distract them from safely negotiating past the incident scene.

A technical report, developed by the ERSI, determined that excessive lighting often contributes to secondary crashes and is a leading cause of struck-by incidents and responder injury or death. For safe operation on roadway incidents, operators should use only enough lights to provide adequate warning to approaching traffic.

Forward-facing lights should ►



Too much lighting can distract drivers and result in secondary crashes.

be kept to a minimum so as not to confuse vehicles coming from the opposite direction of the incident.



This acronym serves as an effective reminder for the safety of tow operators.

Work lights should be sufficient to light up the working area, but not directed towards oncoming traffic, if possible. Reduce the intensity of lighting so that it does not blind approaching traffic. Flashing lights should be of an alternating pattern, and strobe lights should not be used for on-scene operations.

5. LACK OF AWARENESS ON SCENE

When operating at an incident scene, tow operators must always maintain situational awareness. Continually ask yourself, "What is the approaching traffic doing? Are both my vehicle and personnel at risk? Are adequate advanced warning and temporary traffic control devices in place?" Failure to maintain awareness on scene makes the operator a target for distracted or confused drivers.

When possible, consider using a load-and-go or quick-clearance operation to rapidly move the vehicle to a safe area, and then secure the load to the tow vehicle. This approach gets you out of the danger zone, where there is an increased risk of getting struck and injured or killed. If your wrecker has dual controls, use the non-traffic side controls to keep you away from oncoming vehicles.

Practice the acronym LCES: Lookout, Communications, Escape, and Safety.

Whenever possible, have a second responder serve as a Lookout for advanced warning of oncoming traffic, and quickly alert you to potential hazards.

Use Communications to alert police and fire units of the need for lane closures and temporary traffic-control measures. ►

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Plan two Escape paths that allow you to quickly move away from approaching traffic should they enter your work zone.

Practice Safety, including

identifying a safe area where a casualty vehicle can be moved to after a load-and-go operation for securing the vehicle for transport.

Each day, towing and recovery

operators, like all other roadway incident responders, are at risk when working along the nation's roadways. It is critical that they employ best practices and operational procedures—making themselves visible, and working quickly to minimize both their own exposure as well as traffic disruption. By doing so, there is a better chance that everyone will return home safely.

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