



Keys to Staying Safe During a Traffic Stop

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Keys to Staying Safe During a Traffic Stop

According to data compiled by the [National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund](#), 127 law enforcement officers died in 2012 while on duty. The leading cause of death for these officers were traffic-related incidents. Traffic stops can be inherently dangerous for law enforcement professionals due to the presence of traffic, drivers who are not paying attention and violent individuals in vehicles that may try to evade detection or arrest. However, by taking proactive measures during each stage of the stop, law enforcement professionals may be able to reduce the number of deaths and injuries that occur during traffic stops.

Before the Stop

The process of preventing traffic stop injuries occurs well before the initial minutes of a stop. There are several methods that law enforcement officers can employ before a stop is even contemplated to increase safety.

Offer Training Programs

One of the most critical ways that law enforcement professionals can minimize the number of deaths and injuries related to traffic stops is to properly train officers on how to safely make a traffic stop. Every officer who is expected to make a traffic stop should be required to complete this training before going on the beat. Additionally, refresher courses can help if there has been a change in departmental policy or a new law has been passed.

Install the Necessary Equipment

Officers should have all of the necessary equipment installed in their police vehicles before they are expected to make traffic stops. Having dash cameras installed in vehicles may help prevent officer shootings that may occur during traffic stops. These cameras should be publicized to the media so that potential suspects will not believe that there is an advantage to becoming violent with an officer in the hopes to avoid detection since a camera will be recording the whole scenario. Additionally, having GPS installed in all police vehicles can help locate an officer in case he or she is not able to communicate and something alarming has occurred.

Have a Written Policy

Each police department and other law enforcement agencies have their own specific policies regarding traffic stops. For example, one department may prefer officers to approach motorists from the passenger side of the vehicle while another may suggest a direct approach to the motorist. Another department may specify that every traffic stop should include having the motorist exit the vehicle, while the protocol for another department may be to keep the motorist in the vehicle unless a situation arises. Make sure that all procedures are kept in a written handbook and provided to each law enforcement official.

Lobby for Legislation

If police officers band together, they may be able to bring about notable changes in the legislature that may make a significant difference to officers' safety. For example, 24 states as of July 2013 have enacted move-over laws that mandate motorists to move into a further lane when they see a police officer's vehicle on the shoulder. Some organizations have proposed doubling fines for hazardous violations.

Dress the Part

Having a professional appearance can lead to more than a mere promotion. Statistics show that people who have a well-groomed appearance are more likely to be trusted and respected. Ensure that officers are well groomed and comply with all dress code requirements. Additionally, ensure that all law enforcement officials have clothing that offers high visibility so that they can be seen during inclement weather and when lighting is inadequate. The American National Standards Institute Inc. realized the need for high-visibility safety apparel for law enforcement officers and has issued it since 1999. Traffic vests and raincoats that have high-visibility features may prevent a tragedy that would otherwise be caused by a passing motorist who did not see the law enforcement officer.

Consider the Stop

Before pulling over a driver, consider the safety of doing so. If the police officer does not have a partner, the area is unlit and the suspect seems to be acting erratically, it may not be safe to stop the driver at this point. Radioing in the situation and following the driver for a short distance may be safer. If a stop may lead to a dangerous chase that could lead to injuries of innocent bystanders, it may not be the best time, either.

Radio In the Incident

Use a police radio to provide dispatch with the stopping location, direction of travel, cross streets, vehicle plate, type of vehicle, color of vehicle and a description of the driver and any seen passengers. All of this should occur before the officer triggers his lights and siren. Ask for backup if necessary or just to be cautious.

Choose an Appropriate Location

If the officer has decided to stop the vehicle, he or she should direct the driver to a safe location to pull over. Avoid stopping in a known gang area where a member may try to take advantage of a distracted cop. Choose a location that has plenty of lighting and is outside the main flow of traffic if possible. If the stop has to occur on a busy road, make sure that there is adequate shoulder space and that communication is possible. Looking for a place that offers cover in case things go south is also a good idea. All officers should be aware of traffic patterns, ongoing construction and lighting issues if they regularly work in the area. Driveways, parking lots, rest areas and other suitable spots should be used when they are available.

Stopping Your Vehicle

The majority of law enforcement agencies recommend that law enforcement officers stop vehicles at least 10 to 15 feet behind the motorist's vehicle. Other additional safety precautions include parking the police vehicle in a parallel line to the roadway, turning the vehicle's wheels to the right and offsetting the law enforcement vehicle 50 percent of its width to the left side of the motorist's vehicle.

Prepare an Evacuation Route

Before ever getting out of the vehicle, a police officer should scan the immediate vicinity to devise an evacuation route. Scout out potential areas for cover, including concrete highway barriers, bridges and tree lines. This way, if the situation turns dangerous, the police officer can instinctively take the evacuation route that he or she already planned out.

During the Stop

Many traffic-related deaths and injuries occur during the course of the traffic stop. You may approach a vehicle that has a wanted suspect inside of it, when you only knew that the person sped in the area. You may get hit by passing motorists who are not paying attention to the roadway. Follow these procedures to help protect yourself and others during the traffic stop.

Use Lighting to Your Advantage during Night Stops

Pre-set your headlights so that the passenger-side headlight is aimed at the center rearview mirror of the motorist's vehicle. The police vehicle's driver's side headlight should be lined up with the left side mirror. Once the police vehicle is pulled over, this strategy makes it so that the motorist will be blinded with the bright light to disrupt his or her night vision. It also allows the law enforcement officer to approach a vehicle on the passenger's side of the vehicle without creating a dangerous situation, thereby eliminating the motorist's advantage of seeing the law enforcement officer before the law enforcement officer can see the motorist.

Get Out of Your Vehicle Safely

When exiting the vehicle, walk around the back of the police vehicle and approach the passenger's side of the vehicle. This protects you from the dangerous position of being sandwiched between your vehicle and the motorist's vehicle in case the suspect decides to rear-end the police vehicle and escape.

Watch Carefully as You Approach

Stay on the lookout for sudden movements by the occupants of the vehicle. Take note if you see a lot of moving around or shifting in the positions of the occupants. Use this information and any signs of erratic driving or changed driving patterns that you observed prior to the stop to put you on alert for any pending danger. In particular, look for any movements by occupants who could be locating concealed weapons in hidden compartments throughout the vehicle. Call for backup if you notice several occupants in the vehicle or you anticipate problems.

Approach the Vehicle Safely

The department may mandate the direction of the approach, whether the law enforcement officer will need to go to the passenger side door or the driver's side door. However, there are advantages to approaching on the passenger's side if you have the choice. Going to the passenger side door can help give you a better view of the glove compartment in case anyone reaches inside. It may be away from the direction of traffic so that the law enforcement officer does not have to worry about another motorist running him over. Right-handed motorists would have more difficulty concealing their weapon from this angle. This method also helps the law enforcement officer approach in a manner that allows him or her to look across the passenger area while observing the driver.

Once the law enforcement officer arrives beside the vehicle, he or she should continue to remain in a safe location that allows him or her to scan the interior of the vehicle for weapons. The police officer should not position himself or herself in the middle of the window's opening as this is a weak spot and a sign of inexperience.

Identify Yourself

After approaching the vehicle, the law enforcement officer should clearly identify himself or herself. He or she should also state the reason for the traffic stop and make any necessary requests for paperwork. The police officer should maintain a certain composure that shows that he or she is accustomed to traffic stops and that he or she is in control of the situation.

Maintain Control of the Occupants in the Vehicle

Be sure that you are in charge of the situation by maintaining control of the occupants in the vehicle at all times. You should be able to clearly see occupants' hands the entire time. The driver may be able to be ordered to place his or her hands on the steering wheel. Other passengers can be instructed to place their hands on top of their knees. In some cases, you may wish to ask the motorist or another occupant in the vehicle to step out of the vehicle. Do not let someone go back into the vehicle without specific permission since he or she may be retrieving a firearm inside the vehicle. Call for backup to assist with the stop if the number of people outside the vehicle is too many for you to safely handle alone.

Maintain a Professional Demeanor

Acting as a professional can help calm an irate driver or prevent a driver from becoming irate in the first place. After you have identified yourself and your agency, inform the driver of what you observed that caused the stop by focusing on the vehicle and not the driver. For example, say that you observed the vehicle going 10 miles per hour over the speed limit. This method may help alleviate tension and reinforces the justification for the stop. Before asking for paperwork, ask the driver where he or she keeps the paperwork so that you can anticipate the driver's movements before he or she starts reaching for the location. Once you have the driver's license or registration, you can begin addressing the person by his or her name. In general, say "Mr. or Ms." and the person's last name. Any requests should be preceded by the word "please" and followed by the words "thank you."

Some people may be particularly adverse to interactions with police officers, so it is important that you appear non-threatening and communicative. For example, nod after the driver speaks to show that you are listening as your body language can communicate your understanding. Look at the person's eyes when they are speaking, but don't stare, which is considered an aggressive tactic in some cultures.

Maintain a calm tone throughout the verbal exchange. Use a well-modulated voice and avoid having too many inflections, which may seem sarcastic or disrespectful. Do not take on an aggressive or commanding tone. Avoid asking too many questions that could frustrate the driver and be patient regarding any language barriers. Additionally, avoid getting into any kind of confrontation or argument with the motorist or other occupants as this can make the situation quickly turn into a dangerous one.

Give Instructions to the Driver or Occupants

Tell the driver or occupants what you expect them to do. For example, say that you need them to stay inside their vehicles as you review the paperwork. If the occupant has been removed from the vehicle, inform him or her where he or she should stand until you are ready for the next portion of the stop.

Look Over the Paperwork Safely

While some departments may require officers to return to their vehicles to process information, others may recommend that citations and other documents be prepared outside the police vehicle by using a hand computer or clipboard and writing instrument. Be particularly careful during this time as suspects in the vehicle may not have believed that you knew he or she had an outstanding warrant or was wanted, but that you will learn this information when you conduct a search on him or her. Make sure that you or a partner is continuously monitoring the movement of all occupants in the vehicle. Paperwork should be completed in a timely manner. Drivers and other occupants may become agitated if they have to wait too long, and too much time may cause legal problems if the violation is later contested. Explain each step to the driver or occupant as you complete them and prepare for future steps in order to build rapport with him or her.

Communicate the Hazard

Let the driver know why it is important for him or her to drive safely. State with specificity why the violation is a particular cause for concern, such as being related to many crashes in the community or state. Having a positive effect on the driver may lead him or her to develop better driving habits. This also helps the driver realize that the law enforcement officer is interested in safety and did not stop him or her for personal reasons.

Conduct a Search Safely

If you smell or see drugs or alcohol, weapons, or other suspicious elements during the stop, you may want to conduct a search of the vehicle. You may also have grounds to search the vehicle to ensure that there are no weapons inside the vehicle that could be used against you. However, searching the vehicle can lead to other potential safety hazards, such as making an occupant in the vehicle aggressive or irate, so it is particularly important to practice techniques that can help you safely search the vehicle. For example, do not search the vehicle alone. You will need at least one other officer to cover you while you search the vehicle. Also, do not search a vehicle with occupants still inside the vehicle. The vehicle should be in a safe place for the search. For example, the vehicle may be in a congested area or an unlit area. If it is not located in a safe place, consider moving it to a better location that is nearby so that you can still abide by search and seizure rules.

End the Stop on a Positive Note

Let drivers know that you appreciate their behavior. For example, you can compliment them on wearing their seat belt or keeping their child in an appropriate-sized child seat. Even if the driver wound up with an unwanted ticket, thank him or her for his or her cooperation. Use phrases such as "Be sure to buckle up" or "Be sure to look for the posted speed limit." This strategy reinforces the importance of safety and the necessity for the traffic stop.

After the Stop

Your potential for danger is not over simply because you have finished your police duties. Continue watching and monitoring the situation to ensure your safety and that of your fellow officers. Follow these final procedures for optimal safety.

Return to Your Vehicle

It may not be until after you give a driver a citation that he becomes irate and attempts to harm you. Watch his or her reaction and his movements after you give him or her the citation. If your back is turned to the vehicle, listen closely for any noises, such as the driver unexpectedly opening his or her door. Maintain composure and steadily, but quickly return to your vehicle. If the stop resulted in the arrest of any suspects, ensure that they are securely in the back seat of the police vehicle and that they have been properly searched for any potential weapons. Radio in your status to dispatch.

Return to Traffic

Do not drive back on the road immediately. Ensure that you check for traffic from all directions before merging back onto the roadway. Also, help the motorist that you stopped merge back into the flow of traffic as a professional courtesy and to encourage a safe return to the roadway.

Law enforcement officers have the important job in society of maintaining order and safety. Although traffic stops may seem tedious at times, they may quickly turn into dangerous situations. Oncoming traffic may pose a hazard to a law enforcement officer who has to make a stop on the freeway, a wanted suspect may pull out a weapon or an irate driver may physically lash out after receiving a traffic citation for bad behavior. While not all dangerous situations may be able to be avoided, taking these safety steps and following safety procedures may be able to help law enforcement officers to avoid deaths or injuries that occur during these traffic stops.

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