

# Safe Vehicle Operations

By William J. Hinderks, CSP, CPCU, ARM-P

Operating a motor vehicle is by far the single most dangerous activity most people undertake, yet we generally do not give it a second thought. It is not that we do not care about our safety, but rather that we have become complacent. After all, what can a person do?

According to National Safety Council (NSC), 44,800 people died in motor vehicle accidents in 2003, and another 2.4 million were disabled. National Highway Traffic Administration estimates costs at \$230.6 billion dollars a year—or an average of \$820 for every person living in the U.S. This is despite safer vehicles, increased seatbelt usage and better roadway design.

What about at work? According to the 2001 edition of *Injury Facts*, 43 percent of workplace fatalities were transportation-related—nearly three times the second leading cause.

Many public entities operate a substantial fleet. Vehicles range from passenger cars to heavy trucks. They include emergency vehicles such as police cruisers, ambulances and fire trucks.

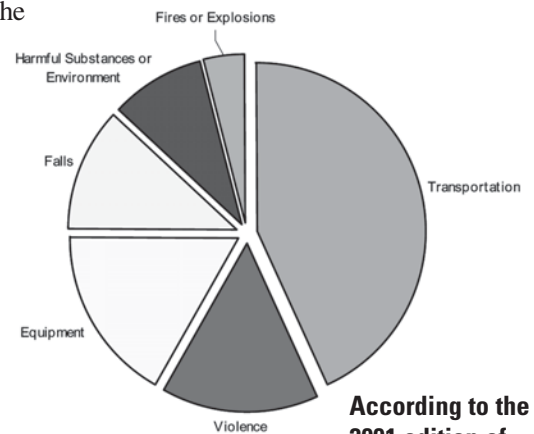
With all of this exposure, it is increasingly prudent and cost-effective for entities to develop what is referred to as a safe vehicle operations program to reduce the probability of accidents, lower repair costs and ensure regulatory compliance. This article describes the fundamental components of such a program.

## Responsibility & Accountability

In organizations with effective programs, everyone from operational management to line employees is responsible for the safe operation of motor vehicles. Specific goals and objectives are written into job accountabilities.

Success can be measured in several ways. Individuals should be evaluated using objectives and measures appropriate for their position. The following examples of goals are guidelines for directors, managers and supervisors as they develop accountabilities for their direct reports:

- 1) Financial Goals
  - a) Reduce the number of vehicle-related accidents by a predetermined percentage.
  - b) Reduce the costs associated with such accidents by a predetermined percentage.
- 2) Employee Satisfaction Goals
  - a) Decrease work related injuries arising out of fleet losses.
- 3) Job Safety Knowledge Management
  - a) Increase employee skills in the safe operation of vehicles and equipment.
- 4) Improve Business Practices
  - a) Establish a driver qualification program.



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## Driver Qualification

One critical function of management in a successful vehicle safety program is to ensure that employees operating vehicles are fully qualified. This starts with the initial hiring process and continues with ongoing review of driving records, accident records and periodic observation.

## Hiring Standards

The following areas should be closely evaluated when selecting new drivers: employment application, interview, reference checks and driving history.

## CDL Requirements

Certain operations require drivers to have a commercial driver's license (CDL). This will

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ensure that qualified drivers are placed into vehicles, and will keep the entity in compliance with the Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1986 and with state law.

### Motor Vehicle Records

Based on NSC statistics, the average driver is involved in one accident every 12 years, and receives one moving violation every 3 years. A typical motor vehicle record (MVR) audit will reveal three to four non-serious violations per each 10 drivers.

Repeaters—drivers with two or more accidents or convictions in a three-year period—are relatively few, but account for 50 percent of the total convictions and 2.5 times the accident frequency of the driver with a clear record. One may question the validity of a clear driving record in predicting accident potential, but a bad record is usually an indication of poor driving habits or attitudes.

Criteria for new hires may differ from policies for existing employees. Collective bargaining agreements may also influence the development of standards. Therefore, the entity must establish its own unique minimum standards of acceptability for MVRs. Whatever criteria are ultimately chosen must be consistent and fairly applied.

### Operational Policies

No two public entities are the same. Establishment of basic policies and procedures sets a standard for the expectations of the organization with respect to various circumstances and situations. It is important that the various standards be articulated in writing. Examples include

requirement to obey all driving laws, application of defensive driving principles, vehicle occupant protection requirements and personal use of entity vehicles.

### Vehicle Inspection & Maintenance

Inspections maintain vehicles and equipment in safe operating condition. Multiple policies may be necessary due to the diversity of vehicles an entity may operate. For example, inspection requirements for CDL-mandated vehicles are dictated by federal and state laws. Requirements for the inspection of fire apparatus and other emergency vehicles may be set by state statute or national code. For the remaining group (e.g., passenger cars, pickups, utility vehicles), a third criteria may be desired.

It should be the collective responsibility of directors, superintendents and supervisors to implement, administer and advise employees under their direction as to the appropriate methods to conduct, document and maintain records of inspections. It should be the responsibility of drivers to complete the inspections and ensure that appropriate repairs are made in a timely fashion upon detection of deficiencies.

### Driver Training

New employee orientation should include a section on vehicle safety. Ongoing training for existing drivers is also important to keep knowledge current and maintain awareness. Training requirements often vary by position and vehicle. At a minimum, drivers should be required to attend a comprehensive program such as NSC's defensive driving course or equivalent program every 3 years. Table 1 lists programs frequently used by public entities.

## Accident Reporting & Investigation

An incident is considered a vehicular accident any time in which an entity owned/operated vehicle (or a personal vehicle operated in the scope of entity business) is involved in a collision with another vehicle, pedestrian and/or property. Entities should communicate procedures, including a requirement that employees involved in a collision, no matter how minor, must contact their supervisors immediately or by the end of the next business day if after hours.

In addition, procedures may address the following elements:

- rendering aid and contacting emergency services;
- reporting incidents to appropriate police agency;
- gathering information at the scene of the incident;
- completion of a vehicle incident report.

### Formal Accident Review

Accident review is a formal process of analyzing accidents to establish preventability and initiate corrective actions. Accident review can be conducted by an individual or by a committee. The format is a matter of entity preference. Committees offer the advantage of multiple points of view and may be more objective.

Before each review meeting, committee members should receive a copy of each accident report, the supervisor's investigation and comments, and a police report. This will give group members an opportunity to review the reports before meeting.

During the meeting, the review board discusses the accident and determines whether the accident is to be evaluated as "preventable" or "non-preventable" based on the board's standard definition of preventability. NSC defines a preventable collision as one in which the driver failed to do everything reasonable to prevent it, regardless of fault.

### Conclusion

Renewed attention has been given to motor vehicle safety in the workplace. On April 7, 2004, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said, "... road safety doesn't happen by chance. Achieving and sustaining safety on the roads requires deliberate action from many sectors of society." This was in recognition of the fact that motor vehicles are claiming 1.2

**TABLE 1 Programs Frequently Used by Public Entities**

| Vehicle or Operation                                     | Recommended Program                                   |
|--|---|
| Personal Passenger Vehicles, SUVs, Vans and Light Trucks | NSC's Four-Hour Defensive Driving Course              |
| Police   | Coaching the Emergency Vehicle Operator II: Police    |
| Fire   | Coaching the Emergency Vehicle Operator II: Fire      |
| Fire/Ambulance   | Coaching the Emergency Vehicle Operator II: Ambulance |
| Public Works Operations                                  | Coaching the Maintenance Vehicle Operator II          |
| Solid Waste Collection                                   | Coaching the Refuse Truck Driver II                   |

million lives each year worldwide. During an address to attendees of the ASSE's Safety 2004 conference, former OSHA Administrator John Henshaw indicated that motor vehicle safety was a specific area addressed by his organization's five-year plan. Presidents Clinton and Bush have both advocated for increased seatbelt usage and other measures to improve traffic safety and save lives.

ASSE is the secretariat for ANSI Z15.1, Safe Practices for Motor Vehicle Operations. Driving safety initiatives are gaining momentum, and it is incumbent upon all organizations to get on board.

By implementing an aggressive safe vehicle operations program, you will improve financial results, increase knowledge and skills, improve business practices, and increase employee morale and job satisfaction. More importantly, you will save lives and reduce suffering. ■

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