



TDCJ Risk Management's *Training Circular*

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Risk Management Issues

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MOTOR VEHICLE SAFETY



The Texas Department of Criminal Justice's greatest asset is its employees. Without dedicated staff, the agency cannot adequately function. Even the unplanned absence of a single employee can have a significant impact on agency operations. Many things can happen that might alter a person's ability to work. Few of them are as sudden or as devastating as an automobile accident. The injury or death of an employee in a motor vehicle crash can not only adversely affect the family of the injured, but it can have significant impact on those who work with them as well.

You may not feel at risk for a car crash on the job — but, you are. Studies conducted by the Texas Workers' Compensation Commission and the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that transportation incidents account for around 40% of occupational fatal injuries in Texas.

Using safety belts and asking your passengers to buckle up greatly reduces the risk of death or serious injury in a motor vehicle accident. Countless statistics and accident investigations

prove that wearing seatbelts usually determines a person's rate of survivability in an automobile accident. Not wearing seatbelts most always increases the chances of a vehicle's occupants having greater injuries.

TDCJ is a very large agency and is literally spread all across Texas. This makes for a lot of 'windshield' time when driving to the various units. If you're having to make a long road trip, plan responsibly to ensure that you have taken into account the distances between units and keep the following driving tips in mind.

Drowsy Driving - The Killer

More people die on the highway than anywhere else. One of the major causes of these deaths is driving while they are tired.

Not all people die in these crashes. Some are slightly injured, and some are disabled for life. For example, one evening, a young man was driving from his girlfriend's house to his home when he began to feel tired. Not wanting to fall asleep at the wheel, he pulled off the road to rest. He slept about two hours.

When he awoke, he felt somewhat refreshed and resumed his trip. He rolled down the driver's window, thinking the cool, night air would keep him awake. Within half an hour, he nodded off at the wheel. When he awoke, his car was going 60 miles per hour and drifting off the road. His first reaction was to get back on the road right away. The sudden jerk on the steering wheel caused the car to flip several times. When the car rolled, the young man's head was whipped around so violently that his spinal cord stretched and several vertebrae broke. Doctors say he may be permanently paralyzed from the chest down.

This man had not been drinking, and he wore his seatbelt. He also had taken driver-improvement training. Unfortunately, his precautions were useless because he wasn't awake to use them.

When driving, people are most likely to get drowsy during the hours when they usually sleep, between midnight and 7 a.m.; at mid-afternoon; when driving alone; or when taking long, monotonous trips. Alcohol, drugs

and prescription medicine also increase the risk of falling asleep at the wheel. As a driver gets tired, his driving performance declines. It takes longer for him to make a decision. People who are sleep deprived tend to have "micro sleeps," which are involuntary naps that usually last up to 10 seconds. Even though a person's eyes may be open, his brain is not processing information. In these 10 seconds, a passenger car can travel about 880 feet, the length of three football fields. As an experiment, the next time you're a *passenger* in a car, close your eyes and count to 10 slowly. Then open them and see how far you've traveled. Imagine driving that distance with your eyes closed.

Here are some ways to fight falling asleep at the wheel.

1. Get a good night's sleep before your trip.
2. Plan to drive long trips with a companion, switching drivers for regular stops, every 100 miles or two hours. Try not to travel more than 10 to 12 hours a day. Passengers should stay awake to talk to the driver.
3. Avoid medications that make you sleepy or affect motor skills and perceptions.

Some symptoms of fatigue are; drifting in the traffic lane and bumping into rumble strips, having trouble remembering the last few miles driven, wandering or disconnected thoughts, having difficulty focusing or keeping eyes open, and yawning repeat-

edly.

Over Driving Your Headlights

When you drive at night, you are in greater danger than when you drive in the daytime. Over one-half of driving deaths happen at night. Factors contributing to increased risk include:

- Reduced visibility. Drivers cannot see as far ahead and can see very little to either side.
- Drowsiness and fatigue.
- Alcohol consumption prior to driving.

The faster you drive, the more time and distance you need to stop, and the less time you have to react. At night, when you can see only as far as your headlights allow, the situation is worse. If you go too fast, you will overdrive your headlights.

Most high-beam headlights, (maintained properly) shine no more than 450 feet ahead. Low-beam headlights shine no more than 350 feet. *Driving within the range* means you should be traveling at a speed which would allow you to stop safely within the distance covered by your headlights. You need to watch carefully for highway signs, signals and pavement markings. Traffic signs and pavement markings reflect light, making them easier to see.

Anything smaller than a car – a motorcycle, moped, bicycle, pe-

destrian or animal – is especially hard to see at night. Pedestrians, animals, and vehicles without lights will be invisible until your headlights shine on them. Most drivers need about 1.5 seconds to react after seeing an object on the road. You might be able to swerve and miss an object or person on the road, but you might not. If you are driving too fast, the consequences can be deadly!

Use high beams as much as possible on highways and unlighted streets. However, low beams are mandatory if you are within 500 feet of another vehicle or in fog. If you think you see something beyond the range of the headlights, flash the high beams for a second to see what is there. If oncoming headlights blind you, slow down and do not look directly at the lights. Look beyond them, at the right edge of the road, but keep the approaching vehicle in your peripheral vision.

Going around a curve, your headlights shine straight ahead. They will not bend around a corner. You must take curves slower because you cannot see as well.

Do not forget to increase your following distance to three seconds *plus*, or more if road or weather conditions are poor. The car ahead may stop with little warning. Extra seconds of following distance give you a greater cushion of space.

If your windshield is dirty, it increases the glare from approach-

ing vehicles. Keep your windshield and headlights clean.

Reduced speed, increased following distance, extra alertness and all the other measures mentioned can all help prevent crashes, but the unexpected still can and often does happen. The most important safety measure of all is to always wear your safety belt.

3 Steps to Safe Driving

Step 1: IDENTIFY THE HAZARDS: Be vigilant when behind the wheel. Keep your eye sweeping from mirror to road to mirror to ensure that not only are you aware of what's in front of you but what may be approaching from behind. Other things to look for might include:

- ⊗ inattentive drivers near you. (i.e. on a cell phone, driving while eating, etc.)
- ⊗ deteriorated road conditions (i.e. wet, icy, flooded, loose gravel, under construction, etc.)
- ⊗ heavy traffic conditions
- ⊗ wildlife (i.e. deer, wild hogs, livestock — this is Texas, we've got all kinds of animals that could wander out onto the highway!)
- ⊗ impaired drivers (i.e. intoxication, exhaustion)

Step 2: ASSESS THE RISK: Assess the impact of each hazard

in terms of potential loss and severity. Determine the level of threat the risk is to you. If severe, decide what control measures need to be taken to decrease risk exposures.

Step 3: ANALYZE RISK CONTROL MEASURES: Once you have identified the hazards and assessed the associated risk, you should decide on some controls that can be employed to reduce or mitigate the hazards:

- ⊗ • Check the weather and drive accordingly. Don't take chances with summer rain. The roads may become slippery and visibility may be poor
- ⊗ • Check for tire tread depth and windshield wiper operation
- ⊗ • Listen to local radio stations for road conditions
- ⊗ • Travel outside of peak-travel times. Drive knowing that you may be slowed by construction, accidents, or for other untold reasons. Keep road rage caged!
- ⊗ • DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE. Use a designated driver program. Get plenty of rest before venturing out of town
- ⊗ • Be ready for wildlife at all times, a deer or other animals can step in front of your vehicle at any time
- ⊗ • Drive defensively and be especially cautious on roads you have not previously traveled

Remember, a lot of folks are counting on you to make the right

decisions when out on the road because your safety isn't the only one at risk.

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