

COLUMNS

Notes From SEFD: Responding to Highway Accidents



by Eddie McArthur
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Just before dawn, there's the sound of squealing brakes, the crash of metal into metal and screams in the darkness. It's yet another traffic collision on State Highway 83 or State Highway 82. [Sonoita-Elgin Fire District](#) (SEFD) is notified, and our first responders head out to one of the most dangerous of their many assignments, a vehicular accident on a highway. Upon arrival our personnel must not only attend to the injured, but also manage traffic and keep themselves and other persons safe while attending to the victims.

Unlike a collision on one of our feeder roads, highway accidents are at higher speed and often involve larger vehicles. Given our small town atmosphere, it's easy to forget that both 82 and 83 are major State Highways. Highway 83 is designated a scenic highway and has a speed limit of 55 mph. Highway 82 allows speeds up to 65 mph. In actual practice, traffic on both highways often moves at speeds well above the posted limit.

As SEFD Chief Marc Meredith often says, "physics always wins." Injuries from these highway collisions can be severe. First responders often must extract the injured from vehicles. Assessment and some treatment happens at the scene, but it is imperative to get people away from the scene to prevent further injuries. An ambulance trip is 45 to 60 minutes to the hospital while a helicopter trip may take only 15 minutes. Not everyone who might benefit from the speed of the helicopter can be safely transported by those means.

Space within the helicopter to treat the injured is limited and may not always be the best form of transport. That makes situations that might require certain treatment like a possible resuscitation unsafe. In addition, due to our warm weather, weight is a bigger issue than in some locales. Helicopters have on occasion flown circles to burn off fuel while their medical personnel assist in treatment on the ground. After reducing weight that way, the injured party may then be transported. Other times, the medical crew from the helicopter may attend the patient in one of our ambulances. All first responders will do whatever is possible to get the injured the help they need.

Changing traffic on our roads is an issue today. More and more large trucks travel both 82 and 83. We've also recently seen a dramatic increase in oversize loads moving through our area. (See "[Wide Loads, Big Problems](#)" in this issue of the PRT.) These large, heavy vehicles take a long time to stop. Pulling out in front of an 18-wheeler or passing only to then hit the brakes is tempting fate at the best. Losing patience due to a hold up for an oversize load can lead to poor choices such as passing in a no passing zone.

And, what about our first responders? The trauma of dealing with an incident involving serious injuries or death is real and can be debilitating, especially when this happens repeatedly. SEFD provides access to a group of mental health professionals who specialize in working with first responders. While we do not require our members to avail themselves of that, we strongly recommend it. Chief Meredith leads by example in seeing one of these professionals on a regular basis.

The real message here is that we each must live with conditions as they are. Allow extra time when traveling to Tucson. Drive within the speed limit and pass only when it is safe to do so. Don't risk your life or the lives of others due to impatience or frustration.