

Discretionary Response to Calls for Service

February 2023

The IACP Law Enforcement Policy Center creates four types of documents: Model Policies, Considerations Documents, Concepts & Issues Papers, and Need to Know one-page summaries. Typically, for each topic, either a Model Policy or a Considerations Document is created, supplemented with a Concepts & Issues Paper. This file contains the following documents:

- ***Considerations Document***: Offered as an alternative to the bright-line directives found in a Model Policy. Instead of providing exact policy language, the Considerations Document outlines items that agencies should address and provides options that agencies should examine when developing their own policies on the topic.
- ***Concepts & Issues Paper***: Designed to provide context and background information to support a Model Policy or Considerations Document for a deeper understanding of the topic.

Glossary

Emergency: A situation with a high probability of death, serious bodily injury, or significant property loss.

Emergency vehicle: An authorized law enforcement vehicle equipped with emergency lights (red/blue/white), sirens, and/or other emergency warning devices required by law and used for emergency response situations.¹

Nonemergency: Any situation other than an “emergency” as defined herein.

¹ Some jurisdictions may have their own specific definitions of what constitutes an emergency vehicle. Refer to applicable state/provincial and local laws and regulations.

Considerations Document

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Discretionary Response to Calls for Service

I. PURPOSE

This policy is intended to provide guidance to law enforcement to make informed decisions in their approach to vehicular response to calls for service, depending on the nature of the call, context, and other varying situational factors. The first priority of call response is to arrive safely at the scene with minimal disruption to the public. In doing so, no matter how urgent the response, officers are required to operate department vehicles in a safe and controlled manner at all times, while taking into consideration the characteristics of the roadway, weather conditions, and the potential actions of other community members.

It is the purpose of this policy to ensure that all members of the agency adhere to appropriate patrol response and that such response is determined based on conditions and circumstances to minimize the risk of accidents or injuries to employees and the public. Considerations in responding to calls for service should balance the exigency of the nature of the call with public safety, traffic laws, and driving conditions.

II. POLICY

An agency should develop a policy statement to concisely explain to agency personnel and the public the agency's policy on differentiated response to calls for service.

Sample: It is the policy of this agency to evaluate the urgency requiring a response to any given situation and to respond accordingly in an effective, efficient, and expeditious manner. It is further the policy of this department that officers shall operate vehicles in a safe and courteous manner consistent with all applicable rules, regulations, policies, statutes, guidelines, and ordinances. All members of this agency shall adhere to appropriate patrol response, balancing speed and efficiency in response with officer and public safety. Responding officers shall ensure that appropriate response is used for the specific conditions and circumstances present that will minimize the risk of accidents or injuries to employees and the public.

III. PROCEDURES

Public safety and protection of human life must remain a priority when responding to calls for service in a vehicle. Officers shall not create additional risk of injury or death to themselves or others when responding to a call in a vehicle.

Response to calls for service shall allow police vehicles to arrive on scene as quickly and safely as possible according to the laws of the jurisdiction governing emergency vehicle operations and the surrounding conditions. When not actively responding to a call that requires an immediate response for service, officers must abide by the same driving practices and traffic laws as every other community member in the applicable jurisdiction.

Officers must:

1. Maintain control of their vehicle at all times.
2. Yield the right of way when necessary.
3. Wear seat belts at all times when operating a vehicle.
4. Not pass to the right of a vehicle in traffic, unless necessary.
5. Activate lights and sirens when appropriate so police vehicles can be seen and heard.
6. Refrain from irresponsible, careless, and reckless driving.

A. Classification of Calls and Response¹

1. In cases of *nonemergency calls* that require in-person response (see Section H), responding officers should observe all applicable traffic laws and traffic control devices en route to the call. Officers shall not use emergency lights and sirens when responding. These call types include (but are not limited to) traffic collisions with no injuries and crimes that have occurred with no further threat of immediate danger (breaking and entering a motor vehicle, burglary, criminal trespass, etc.).
2. In cases of *emergency calls*, responding officers shall activate emergency lights and/or sirens in accordance with applicable law. These call types include (but are not limited to) crimes in progress or emergencies where there is an immediate danger of serious bodily injury or death.
 - a. When responding in the emergency mode, the headlights of the emergency vehicle should be activated to augment the emergency vehicle's visibility.
 - b. Responding units may exceed the maximum speed limit, as permitted by applicable laws and/or agency rules/regulations as long as exceeding the speed limit does not pose an unnecessarily excessive danger to the public or property.
 - c. Officers shall use extreme caution when approaching an intersection with a traffic light or stop sign. Emergency lights and sirens shall be used at all intersections as needed. Other lights and sirens (alternating operating tone, air horn) are encouraged when clearing intersections. Responding units must come to a complete stop at all intersections when passing through a red light. If it is necessary to cross the intersection against the light or stop sign, emergency vehicles should stop to ensure traffic and pedestrians are clear before crossing the intersection.
 - d. Responding units shall use continuous emergency lights and sirens when responding to the call until the officer arrives on scene or is advised to reduce response urgency.

¹ Specific designations and terms for categorizing responses may vary across jurisdictions. Agencies may designate "codes" to simplify radio communications when indicating which response category is required from responding units.

- e. Responding officers may deactivate emergency signals at a distance from the scene (to be determined by the vehicle operator) if appropriate for tactical considerations. Officers who deactivate emergency signals but are still engaged in emergency response should proceed with elevated caution and must comply with all traffic laws.
- f. The spotlight shall primarily be utilized to facilitate building and stationary vehicle checks and shall at no time be directed at the windshield or vision of oncoming traffic.
- g. When emergency lights and sirens are deactivated, the operator of the emergency vehicle shall return to driving in a manner consistent with normal traffic flow, complying with posted speed limits and obeying all traffic control devices and signals.

B. Determining Response Modes to Calls for Service

The nature of a call typically determines the appropriate response mode. However, as new information presents itself about an incident in progress, the responding officer may adjust the priority of the call and its corresponding response mode, as appropriate. This may also be the case regarding events witnessed by the officer but unknown to communications personnel, field supervisors, or the commanding officer.

1. When an officer wishes to initiate emergency response or upgrade a routine response assignment, the field unit shall inform communications personnel as soon as possible of:
 - a. The nature of the situation,
 - b. The location and destination of the field unit, and
 - c. Driving conditions.
2. Field supervisors and/or communications personnel assigning officers to respond to calls for assistance may authorize which response mode is to be utilized.
3. The responding officer may use their own discretion to modify the response type, with appropriate justification. Supervisors may approve or overrule this modification, as appropriate.

C. Requesting Backup Assistance

Responding officers may request the assistance of additional officers at their discretion.

1. Officers may request backup assistance when they become aware of facts or circumstances that may warrant additional units to respond. This may occur while en route to a call for service or after the first officer has arrived on scene. The requesting officer should provide sufficient information to inform the response of backup officers, including call type and priority.
2. It is also possible that new information emerges indicating that requested backup assistance is not needed. The responding officer or supervisor may modify the requested response, accordingly (including suggesting nonemergency response). When modifying the response:
 - a. The officer or supervisor must clearly communicate over the radio that additional response is not required and all units may resume to normal duties.
 - b. Additional responding units must verbally confirm the acknowledgement of the change in response.

D. Communications

Officers should maintain professional communications while on duty, ensuring the following:

1. Maintain adequate radio volume for awareness and clear communication when responding.²
2. Reduce external distractions, including rolling up windows to eliminate outside noises.
3. Ensure dispatchers and fellow officers are kept aware of the situation and any updates or changes that occur.
4. Keep communications brief, direct, and clear.
5. Use plain language when working with other agencies.
6. Know and understand the backup radio protocol should loss of communications occur.³

E. Use of Emergency Lights and Sirens

Emergency lights shall also be used in nonemergency cases to make adequate notice of intent to stop a motor vehicle and to provide a safe environment for the vehicle operator, officer, and public. Sirens may also be used in this case at the officer's discretion, or as directed by applicable laws and/or agency policy.

In other situations, emergency lights and sirens may be used in response to nonemergency calls for service at the officer's discretion and communicated appropriately:

1. Officers may activate emergency lights and sirens when required to assist in handling any perceived emergency situation. The officer shall advise communications personnel of the nature of the emergency and the emergency response mode being used.
2. In nonemergency situations, when expediency is required to effectively eliminate a potential hazard to the public or fellow officers, law enforcement officers may activate emergency lights and sirens to allow orderly and safe transit through heavily congested roadways. Examples of permissible uses of emergency lights and sirens during nonemergency response situations include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Using emergency lights as "beacons" to protect disabled motorists, or
 - b. Using emergency lights when it is necessary to use agency vehicles as protective barriers.
3. Operators of emergency vehicles shall deactivate emergency lights and sirens when appropriate.

F. Activating In-Car or Body-Worn Cameras

Officers should follow agency policy for activating in-car and/or body-worn cameras (BWCs) as recommended practices vary based on the equipment and resources available.⁴

² In some cases, the use of mobile data computers may be preferred over radio in order to limit radio traffic. Refer to agency policy for specific guidance on when each mode of communication is most appropriate.

³ Refer to agency policy for specific guidance.

⁴ Refer to agency policy for specific guidance. Camera activation policies will vary by agency. For additional information, see the IACP Law Enforcement Policy Center documents on [Mobile Video Recording Equipment](#) and [Body-Worn Cameras](#).

G. Reports and Documentation

A report should be documented for every response to a call for service pertaining to a criminal incident.⁵ The report should include details such as the response mode based on urgency of the call, whether lights and/or sirens were activated, and a description of the vehicle that responded (marked or unmarked). Additional details might include weather conditions, whether the officer was equipped with a camera (in-car and/or BWC), whether or not the camera was activated, and what the officer was wearing (uniform vs. plainclothes).

H. Virtual Response and Online Reporting

Some nonemergency calls for service may not require an in-person response. In appropriate circumstances and where capabilities allow, some calls can instead be addressed online, over the phone, or via video conference.

1. Incidents that do not require on-scene investigation can usually be resolved over the phone.
2. Vehicle collisions with no injuries and limited property damage can usually be resolved over the phone.
3. Reports can often be filed online or via an app. Where available, these electronically filed reports can be routed to the appropriate responder automatically. Electronic filing submissions should include an option for the user to upload photos/videos.

⁵ Some agencies may require a report for every response to a call for service, regardless of whether the call involved a criminal incident or not. Refer to agency policy for specific guidance.

Every effort has been made by the IACP Law Enforcement Policy Center staff and advisory board to ensure that this document incorporates the most current information and contemporary professional judgment on this issue. However, law enforcement administrators should be cautioned that no model policy can meet all the needs of any given law enforcement agency. In addition, the formulation of specific agency policies must take into account local political and community perspectives and customs, prerogatives, and demands; often divergent law enforcement strategies and philosophies; and the impact of varied agency resource capabilities, among other factors. Readers outside of the United States should note that, while this document promotes procedures reflective of a democratic society, its legal basis follows United States Supreme Court rulings and other federal laws and statutes. Law enforcement administrators should be cautioned that each law enforcement agency operates in a unique environment of court rulings, state laws, local ordinances, regulations, judicial and administrative decisions, and collective bargaining agreements that must be considered and should therefore consult their agency's legal advisor before implementing any policy.

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Concepts & Issues

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Discretionary Response to Calls for Service

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose of the Document

This paper was designed to accompany the Responding to Calls for Service Considerations Document established by the IACP Law Enforcement Policy Center. This paper provides essential background material and supporting documentation to provide greater understanding of the developmental philosophy and implementation requirements offered in the Considerations document. It is anticipated that this material will be of value to law enforcement executives in their efforts to tailor their policy to the requirements and circumstances of their community and their law enforcement agency.

B. Definitions

The Considerations Document specifies an emergency vehicle as “an authorized law enforcement vehicle equipped with emergency lights (red/blue/white), siren or other emergency warning devices required by law or the employing agency and used for emergency response situations.”

¹ Emergency warning devices are defined as “devices placed in/on each agency emergency vehicle that emit audible or visual signals in order to warn others that law enforcement services are in the process of being delivered” and are hereafter referred to as “lights and sirens.” Unless a vehicle is equipped in this fashion, it should not be used as an emergency vehicle.

In some cases, officers may, because of the exigency of the circumstances and an overwhelming desire to provide assistance, be inclined to respond to incidents in vehicles that may not meet the above requirements. However, the use of undercover operations vehicles that are not adequately equipped, specialized vehicles used in traffic or other operations, personal vehicles owned by law enforcement officers, or any other vehicle that does not meet these requirements should not be employed as an emergency vehicle. Vehicles that are not properly equipped for emergency response may pose a danger, not only because other motorists may not see them and have adequate warning to avoid them, but they may create a situation in which other motorists may perceive the operator as an

¹ This is the definition as used in this document. State laws may establish their own specifications as to what constitutes an emergency vehicle.

impaired or reckless driver or one who is being intentionally provocative. Under such circumstances, the officer may become engaged in a confrontational situation on the highway that creates another problem rather than solves one.

C. Background

The Discretionary Response to Calls for Service Considerations Document was established in order to assist law enforcement agencies in developing appropriate procedures to safely and efficiently respond to calls for service in vehicles. Inappropriate and unauthorized responses can create circumstances in which the safety of the officers and public is compromised. Even when used properly, emergency lights and sirens can invoke a fright or panic reaction among pedestrians and motorists who, through confusion or fear, may react in unexpected ways. As such, officers should use these devices only when necessary and under prescribed conditions and circumstances that will minimize the risk of accident or injury to employees or the public.

Additionally, responding to calls—even under emergency circumstances—does not excuse law enforcement officers from operating their vehicles without reasonable care. State statutes enumerate those few driving privileges that an officer may exercise under emergency conditions, and the department policy may be further restrictive. Common provisions from which an emergency vehicle operator is exempt include following parking and standing requirements, stopping for signal lights and stop signs, exceeding stated speed limits, and following regulations governing direction of movement or turning in specified directions. Failure to employ reasonable care for the safety of others when operating under emergency conditions must not be tolerated. Damages and injuries that may occur from unauthorized and/or irresponsible acts of this type may result in civil liability actions against the officer, the department, and the employing jurisdiction.

II. PROCEDURES

A. Assigning/Determining Response Mode to Calls for Service

Many law enforcement agencies in the United States use categories or designations to determine the urgency of vehicular response.² For example, the category of a nonemergency response requires that officers observe all applicable traffic laws and traffic control devices when they are responding to a call. This response mode does not utilize emergency lights and sirens. The emergency response category, however, does utilize emergency lights and/or sirens when responding to a call. Field supervisors or communications personnel should designate the nature of the call, and responding officers should determine the appropriate response mode based on the call priority designation. Field supervisors and responding officers should monitor calls for assistance and, when warranted by the circumstances, upgrade or downgrade authorized responses.

When field officers wish to upgrade or downgrade a call for service based on circumstances known to the officer, the officer should provide communications personnel with certain types of information as soon as possible. This includes information on the nature of the situation, the crime or emergency involved, the number of individuals involved, if emergency medical assistance is required, if firearms or other weapons are involved, if additional law enforcement assistance is needed, and the location and destination or direction of travel of the field unit, among other potential factors. Based on this information, communications personnel, field supervisors, or commanding officers will authorize, upgrade, or downgrade the emergency response request.

² Specific terms used to describe response type may vary across jurisdictions. Agencies may designate “codes” to simplify radio communications that indicate the required category of response for units en route.

B. Use of Emergency Lights and Sirens While in Emergency Response Mode

When an emergency response has been authorized, officers must activate emergency lights, sirens, and/or other emergency signal devices as required by state law. The headlights of the emergency vehicle should be activated to augment the emergency vehicle operator's visibility, as well as others' ability to see the vehicle.

Officers are prohibited from directing the emergency vehicle's spotlight at the windshield or vision of oncoming traffic. It should also not be used to signal individuals to pull to the roadside as it may cause temporary blindness to the driver. The spotlight is used primarily for building searches and related purposes and should not be used in a manner that would blind other drivers. When conducting traffic stops at night or under high-risk conditions, the spotlight may also be used to illuminate the interior of the violator's car so that all occupants are kept within view and at a disadvantage when looking back at the officer or his/her/their vehicle.

In some emergency response situations, officers may wish to deactivate their emergency lights and sirens at a distance from the scene in order to avoid detection of their approach. This technique may be employed so long as the emergency vehicle operator proceeds thereafter in a manner that is consistent with all local traffic laws and ordinances.

There are other situations in which emergency lights and sirens may also be used. Vehicle stops are perhaps the most common situation of this type. Normally in these situations, activation of emergency lights when approaching directly behind a vehicle will be adequate indication to the driver that he/she/they should pull to the side of the road. If this is not adequate, however, intermittent or continuous use of the siren should gain the driver's attention. In this and other situations, the siren should be used with discretion as it has a startling effect that can cause drivers to act erratically and unpredictably.

There are a variety of other situations in which an officer may need to use emergency signal devices. Under such conditions, the officer should advise communications personnel as soon as possible about the nature of the emergency and the actions that have been taken. This may also be the case in nonemergency situations when officers elect to use the emergency equipment to assist motorists in avoiding road hazards or to alert them to potential dangers. Typical among these are situations in which emergency lights are used as "beacons" to protect disabled motorists, those at the scene of an accident, or when the officer's vehicle must be used as a protective barrier at these or other incidents. Lights should always be activated to give proper notice to allow passing vehicles to abide by move-over laws.³

In all cases when emergency lights and sirens are used, they should be deactivated as soon as possible. Emergency lights and sirens can unnecessarily attract attention and draw curious individuals to the scene of emergencies. This often adds to traffic congestion and confusion that can detract from efficient resolution of the situation.

C. Roles and Responsibilities

Differentiated response to calls for service involves the cooperation and sharing of information from multiple parties including dispatchers, responding officers, backup officers, and supervisors. Dispatchers play a critical role in the assignment of a response type. Because dispatchers often receive the initial call for service, they are most aware of circumstances of the call and can assign the call type, priority, and appropriate response mode for the responding officer. The responding officer utilizes this information from the dispatcher in order to determine the appropriate response and can modify or override the dispatcher's initial decision as new information becomes available. Some agencies may require justification and/or supervisor approval before accepting an officer's modification to an existing

³ For more information see Federal Highway Administration (FHA), "Move Over Laws," from *Traffic Incident Management Quick Clearance Laws: A National Review of Best Practices* at https://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/fhwahop09005/move_over.htm and, "Move Over Laws," from Ingrid Birenbaum, Charles Creel, and Sally G. Wegmann, *Traffic Control Concepts for Incident Clearance* (FHA, 2009) at <https://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/fhwahop08057/20.htm>.

call for service. Whether approval is required or not, supervisors should be responsible for monitoring response modes to calls for service and shall have the authority to upgrade or downgrade assigned response modes.

The process of dispatching officers for response and determining the response type requires a top-down, as well as a bottom-up, flow of communication from all parties involved. This should be a cooperative and continual process until the call is resolved and closed.

D. Public Complaints about Police Driving

Responding officers should be mindful of erratic or risky driving during calls for service response. Community members who witness irresponsible driving may file complaints of such behavior with the department. Although community members may not always understand the factors involved in responding to calls for service, they may report complaints of officers driving irresponsibly if they feel an officer's driving poses an unnecessary risk to public safety.⁴

E. Unfounded Reports

Although communications personnel will try to get as much information as they can about incoming calls for service, the true nature of any call for service may be unclear until the responding officer arrives on scene and conducts further assessment. In some cases, this may be due to differing perceptions or miscommunication. For example, an officer may respond to a caller who reported a suspicious event—but, once on scene, the officer realizes the reporting person has a mental health condition that causes paranoia. If there is no evidence of the event described, the responding officer may consider reclassifying the nature of the call in the RMS for more accurate records.

In some cases, deception as to the nature of the call may be intentional—a practice known as *swatting*. This is a form of harassment that may be directed at public safety members or community members. Examples include fabricated bomb threats, threats of suicide, or false reports of hostage situations. Reports of such serious incidents may require forceful response from the police and/or mass evacuation. Although police officers have a responsibility to respond accordingly to such critical incidents, responding to false reports wastes police time and resources and can cause unnecessary panic in the community. Further, swatting is sometimes used as a technique to lure police to a particular location for a planned ambush, putting officer safety at increased risk. Police officers responding to any call for service should always remain vigilant.

While most calls for service are not attempts to ambush police, officers should be prepared for such a possibility. Training should emphasize the importance of maintaining constant situational awareness and vigilance. Officers should pay careful attention to all aspects of a situation, slow down and de-escalate the situation to the extent possible, and adjust their response approach as the situation changes or as new information is presented. In highly suspicious circumstances and where resources allow, undercover units or unmarked vehicles may respond to gather more information before uniformed officers arrive on scene. In any case, it is wise for all officers to keep extra protective gear such as helmets, shields, and other equipment on hand in their vehicles.

⁴ For more information, see the IACP policy documents on the Investigation of Allegations of Employee Misconduct at <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/employee-misconduct>.

F. Performance Metrics

Police response to calls for service has traditionally been measured in terms of response time; however, while quick and efficient response to calls for service is important, not all service needs warrant an immediate emergency response at the risk of public safety. Other metrics should be considered to measure performance depending on the nature of the call that consider response time, public safety, compliance with policy and regulations, and the balance between these sometimes competing priorities.⁵ Alternative metrics for consideration include:⁶

- Deaths/injuries to officers and community members
- Property damage
- Repeated calls for service at the same location
- Department staffing levels and resource allocation/efficiency
- Community satisfaction surveys
- Complaints from the public
- Accuracy and completion of documented reports
- Response time using alternative responses – Response time can be measured by the officer’s physical presence on scene, or it might be measured in virtual presence through phone, video, or other forms of electronic response. Both the response times for each of these modes, as well as the number and frequency of each type of response, can be tracked.

III. SUMMARY

Responding to calls for service requires discretion in the balance between swift arrival on scene and potential danger to public safety while en route. While it is sometimes warranted for officers to violate certain traffic laws to ensure swift arrival on scene, misuse or inappropriate use of this discretion can have serious results. As such, controls should be established that specify those who have the authority under specific circumstances to designate or change emergency response modes. The manner in which emergency response modes are employed should also be the subject of personnel training and supervisory oversight.

⁵ For additional suggestions, see Luke Bonkiewicz, “The IMPACTT of a Patrol Officer: Evaluating Productivity Metrics,” in National Institute of Justice, *Perspectives on Research and Evidence-Based Policing* (August 2020), 15-20, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/255052.pdf>.

⁶ Metrics can include the number of events that occurred and/or the number of events that were prevented by police intervention.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Breul, N. “Officer Safety in Responding to Domestic Violence Calls for Service.” Research in Brief, *Police Chief* (January 2017): <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/research-in-brief-officer-safety-in-responding-to-domestic-violence-calls-for-service/>
- IACP. “Community-Police Engagement.” (2020): <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/community-police-engagement>.
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- IACP Law Enforcement Policy Center. *National Consensus Policy and Discussion Paper on Use of Force*. (2020): <https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/national-consensus-policy-and-discussion-paper-on-use-of-force>.
- IACP / UC Center for Police Research and Policy. “Assessing the Impact of Co-Responder Team Programs: A Review of Research.” *The Academic Training to Inform Police Responses*. (2020): <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/IDD/Review%20of%20Co-Responder%20Team%20Evaluations.pdf>.
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- Neusteter, S. et al. *The 911 Call Processing System: A Review of Literature as it Relates to Policing*. Vera Institute of Justice (2019): <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/911-call-processing-system-review-of-policing-literature.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. *Call Management and Community Policing: A Guidebook for Law Enforcement* (2003): <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-w0022-pub.pdf>.

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