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Local officials debate appropriate use of lights, sirens

By DAN SPRINGER / La Crosse Tribune

As a county committee looks into adopting an Emergency Medical Dispatch operation, the way emergency personnel respond to incidents in La Crosse is being brought into question.

Under current policies, first responders with the La Crosse Fire Department use lights and sirens when responding to medical calls — even those in which the caller clearly asks for no lights or sirens. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, there are 13,500 accidents involving emergency vehicles each year.

According to Matt Zavadsky, director of Tri-State Ambulance, one way to reduce the risk of accidents is to have emergency crews slow down and cut the lights and sirens when responding to non-emergency calls.

La Crosse Fire Chief Gregg Cleveland counters that just because first responders are responding hot — with lights and sirens — does not mean they are being reckless.

“Although the lights and sirens are on, they’re operating the vehicle with due regard,” Cleveland said.

Cleveland stressed that firefighters go through extensive training on how to safely operate the vehicles. Each driver must go through an additional 40 hours of classes then pass a written and practical exam before they are allowed to drive one of the vehicles.

It is that training that keeps the emergency vehicles safe when they are responding to an incident, Cleveland said.

“Our people are using their knowledge, skills and abilities when going to (a) call,” Cleveland said. “It’s not like they’re going 65 to 70 mph down a city residential street. Common sense comes in. We train our people, and they have to use discretion.”

Zavadsky points out that in the past week, La Crosse first responders have used lights and sirens to such non-emergencies as elderly people who have fallen and need help getting back into bed.

In each of those cases, the caller specifically asked dispatchers for no lights or sirens, but fire crews chose to use full lights and sirens anyway. Cleveland defends that practice saying falls may appear to be minor, but may be the sign of a more serious problem.

“In a certain percentage of those calls, the person fell for a reason. But we aren’t going to understand that reason or know that reason until we get there,” Cleveland said. “They may have a heart condition and the fall is only secondary. The primary reason is there may be an underlying heart or other condition that caused that fall.”

Whether to use lights and sirens is something not just firefighters have to deal with.

La Crosse Police chief Ed Kondracki said the use of emergency warning equipment is something police officers deal with every day. Police use such equipment when responding to serious incidents like crimes, accidents, other life-threatening situations or when pulling over vehicles for traffic infractions, Kondracki said.

In each case, the officers must use their own best judgment to decide how to use the equipment in a way that will not put themselves or others in danger, Kondracki said.

"As an example in a hot pursuit when it looks like there's an unnecessary risk to the driver or the other drivers they can call off a chase," Kondracki said. "Once you initiate chasing a traffic violator and it looks like it will endanger the general public, they can call it off or the supervisor can call it off."

Likewise, Cleveland said the decision to use lights and sirens should be left to the trained drivers who must also use their best judgment to decide the right response for the situation.

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