

PA FIRE POLICE WRITING REPORTS

By Tony Riccardi - PA State Fire Academy Approved Fire Police Instructor

This month, we would like to discuss a situation that may or may not come back to haunt a fire police officer, that of writing reports following a response, whether emergency or non-emergency.

“Why should this be necessary?” Responds the Fire Police Officer, “I’m not a police officer!”

Agreed, however, let’s examine a situation that could occur during any type of response by fire police officers.

You have been dispatched to an incident during which you may be required to reroute traffic due to emergency equipment on scene, road closure, etc. Along comes a motorist who dislikes the idea of changing his normal habit of going the way you are now preventing him from doing. Unfortunately, he gets angry and a confrontation follows during

which time words are exchanged and maybe some minor shoving or touching occurs.

In most incidents, the fire police officer now has a “war story” to share with his fellow fire police officers and, of course, when telling it, embellishes it beyond what actually occurred.

Meantime, the motorist decides that he is unhappy about the treatment he received from the fire police officer and consults an attorney to explore his/her options. Several months later, the fire police officer receives notification that he/she is being sued in court for “violating the rights of another person.”

In all likelihood, you cannot recall what you had for dinner a year or two ago, so how will you recall what happened during that confrontation sometime ago? A typical backlog in civil court is somewhere between three to five years. What if the individual, in discussing what occurred with their attorney, also embellishes the matter in their favor? How will you defend yourself and what will you produce to verify your response to the accusation? Writing reports is not as difficult as many imagine. The critical information required when writing the report is to identify who, what when, where, why and how. If all these elements appear in your document, you have a complete report. What if nothing of significance occurs during your duty assignment? That also should be documented. If a situation develops later on and someone makes an accusation, you have no defense that it did not occur if there is no written record of that event. In this instance, you can point to your report where it states that nothing occurred. There is a case precedent which states (Whitney v Warden) “**If it is not documented, it did not occur.**” The courts did not accept the testimony of the police officer (Warden) because the information was not documented. Something for you to think about.

A major concern for fire police officers that seems to be getting worse is the aggressive driver. A survey conducted among drivers who admit to

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driving aggressively found that most drivers stated they were running late and become frustrated when they encounter slow drivers or anything that contributes to delaying them even more. As a fire police officer, your concern is to deal with the incident at hand but, what do you do about the individual who is extremely impatient and takes their anger out on you?

First, you need to understand what is occurring. Anyone who's been stuck in traffic knows that the opportunity exists for almost anyone to become hostile. Unfortunately, that frustration may be taken out on the fire police officer. The most difficult thing for the fire police officer to realize and accept is the frustration is not aimed at you personally, but at the situation in which the driver now finds himself/herself. It doesn't make it any easier but what is happening is a mismatch between goals and reality – what you want and what you've got – engenders frustration. That's the first step toward anger and frustration. Another factor that may bear on a driver's aggression is that – their vehicle – they are virtually anonymous. This is called "Deindividuation" – a concept developed from the studies of crowds and mobs. When a person's anonymity seems assured, they become less inhibited.

In many cases, the anger is made worse by the reciprocal conduct of the fire police officer. Most fire police want to be treated as a professional, this is the time to conduct yourself in a manner that will get you the respect and professionalism you desire and deserve. Remember, you want the motorist to cooperate and obey your orders – that won't happen when you add to their already frustrating experience. There are other times when drivers become angry and frustrated - when they don't know where a road they are rerouted on will take them. This is one of the major complaints we have received from fire police over the years, the belief that they don't have time to answer questions from drivers. The obvious question is "why not?" Isn't that why you are here in the first place? Getting motorists safely and expediently around an emergency scene is a vital part of the fire police officer's responsibilities.

These are the instances where you can do much to enhance the image of the fire police officer. Don't miss the opportunity to create good public relations; it pays off in the long run.

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