



NUMBER	EMS 108
TITLE	Vehicle Operations & Safety
CATEGORY	OPERATIONS
APPROVED BY	Board of Supervisors
EFFECTIVE DATE	2026-03-31
ORIGINATION & REVISION DATES	2026-03-31

PURPOSE

To establish safe and consistent guidelines for the operation of emergency and non-emergency vehicles by EMS personnel with an emphasis on the safety of patients, personnel, and the public.

GUIDELINE

This guideline serves as part of the *Cedar County EMS System Emergency Vehicle Driving Policy*.

DEFINITIONS

1. Emergency (Mode) – Driving operations generally with the use of visible and/or audible warning devices as designated in Iowa Code 321.231
2. Non-Emergency (Mode) – Normal driving operations without the use of visible and/or audible warning devices and following normal traffic patterns/laws

GENERAL VEHICLE OPERATIONS

All State of Iowa motor vehicle laws, including those specifically related to emergency vehicles, should be followed at all times.

Drivers will not drive under the influence of alcohol or after taking any medicine, drug, or compound which may impair their senses or interfere with their ability to drive.

Each vehicle, whether designated for emergency or non-emergency operations, must be operated with due regard and in consideration of the safety of EMS crew members and the public. While the entire EMS crew is responsible to ensure safe operations, it is the ultimate responsibility of the driver to maintain safe vehicle operations. At no time should a driver operated a vehicle in a way they feel is unsafe. At no time should a driver be expected to operate a vehicle in an unsafe way.

All personnel are expected to always maintain a professional demeanor when operating an agency vehicle, or while riding as a passenger.

Seatbelts are to be worn by drivers and passengers at all times while riding in vehicles, unless actively providing direct patient care and/or interventions that prohibits wearing of such. Drivers should not move the vehicle until assuring all vehicle occupants are seated and belted. The overall objective is to remain seated and properly secured (belted) during transport or other driving operations. Patients must also be properly secured to either a bench/seat or the cot/stretchers during all portions of their transport. As much as possible, new ambulance specifications should focus on designs where personnel may remain secured and still provide needed patient care.



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Headlights, or daytime running lights if so equipped, are to remain on whenever the vehicle is in motion. All lights should be turned off when the vehicle is powered off.

Use of electronic devices while driving must be voice-activated or hands-free except as exempted in Iowa Code 321.276; however, even with the exemption, every attempt to remain hands-free should be made. Personal cell phone use is prohibited in ambulances while the ambulance is assigned to a call, but this does not include the use of a personal device for necessary call- or duty-related communications.

While assigned to a call, a "sterile cockpit" concept should be adhered to which includes turning off any entertainment systems and other non-essential audio/visual devices that are not utilized for direct emergency communications and remaining focused on the response.

When driving into a gated area or through garage door, drivers should wait until the gate or door has fully opened and halted in an open position before proceeding past it; it should also not be a standard practice to immediately follow other vehicles past opened gates or through opened doors, as such should be individually verified as (and activated) to "open" before passing by them.

To be response ready, park vehicles facing out whenever possible so that in the event of a call they do not have to back up to respond. Vehicles are prohibited from parking in a "Fire Lane" or otherwise unauthorized parking locations, unless they are actively on scene at a call/incident at the given location. Even on calls, try to avoid parking in or blocking disabled parking spaces. Generally, park away from other vehicles where you will have enough room to maneuver, and never place the vehicle where it will be blocked in the event of a call.

It should be considered a best practice to refill vehicles with their appropriate fuel before they are at the three-quarter (3/4) level. Vehicles must be filled if they reach one-half (1/2). This does not preclude filling while below such status. It may also be requested/ordered for tanks to maintain a full (or near-full) status during states of local disaster/emergency, anticipated poor weather conditions, and/or times of anticipated fuel shortages.

Daily or other assigned operational checks may be assigned to EMS crews respective to functional vehicle checks and safety inspections and should be completed as assigned.

Mechanical modifications are not permitted to any agency vehicle without prior written approval from the EMS Director.

EMERGENCY VEHICLE OPERATIONS

Know where you are going before you respond. This involves a continuum of pre-dispatch preparation and district familiarization and checking maps and GPS prior to initiating a response. If there are questions as to a call's location, confirm with dispatch prior to responding.

Emergency mode does not automatically mean that responding vehicles need to exceed the speed limit. It may just facilitate proceeding through traffic and traffic control devices.



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Consideration to drive in emergency mode should only be made after accounting for dispatch information, other SOGs, clinical operating guidelines, and the following considerations:

- Crew, patient, and civilian/driver safety;
- Patient's condition, while using critical decision-making and considering any potential "alert" status criteria; and
- Timeliness of one's response to the scene, or transport to a hospital, given a different response mode.

Use of Warning Devices

Generally, while responding in emergency mode, both visible and audible warning devices should be utilized. Use of only visible warning devices, or the use of visual warning devices with only intermittent audible warning device use, may be considered during periods of extremely light traffic, late night responses, and while in primarily residential neighborhoods provided due regard for safety is exercised. When responding in emergency mode from any station located in a primarily residential neighborhood, audible warning device use should be avoided within the immediate vicinity of the station.

Speed Limitations

Drivers should not exceed a driving speed that is considered safe and prudent for road conditions, weather conditions, time of day, or other extenuating circumstances, including the design and capabilities of the vehicle in which they're driving. Drivers operating in emergency mode may exceed the posted speed limit only when the aforementioned factors are considered.

School Zone speeds (while in effect) shall be followed, regardless of response mode.

Intersection Navigation

When approaching a negative right-of-way (e.g., red light, flashing red light, stop sign, yield sign, uncontrolled intersection) intersection, a blind intersection, or an intersection where hazards are present and/or the driver cannot account for all oncoming and cross traffic lanes, the emergency vehicle shall come to a full stop before entering the intersection. The emergency vehicle should not enter the intersection until all approaching traffic has yielded the right-of-way and it is safe to proceed. The emergency vehicle driver should ensure that all approaching vehicles in all lanes have yielded the right-of-way before advancing. If necessary, due to traffic conditions or visual obstructions, the emergency vehicle driver should cross the intersection in stages, treating each lane as a separate intersection, stopping the vehicle as needed, to ensure that each lane may be crossed safely.

When approaching an intersection where the emergency vehicle has the right-of-way (e.g., a green light in the direction of travel and/or a stop signal or sign for cross-traffic), drivers should still slow down, consider the due regard for others, and be prepared to stop. When entering the intersection, the vehicle must be under complete control and driven so it can be safely stopped to avoid a collision if another vehicle enters the intersection.



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The "right-of-way" must be granted by other drivers. Yield to any vehicle already in an intersection and do not enter an intersection until all oncoming and cross traffic has yielded the right-of-way and the intersection can be negotiated safely.

Use extra caution if other emergency vehicles may be approaching the same intersection, paying attention to traffic preemption indicator lights where available. The right-of-way for two responding units is generally determined by the following sequence:

- Units having the right-of-way by traffic control devices (green light over red);
- Units traveling through an intersection without negotiating any turns will have preference over vehicles having to turn (straight over turn);
- Units making a right turn at an intersection will have preference over units making a left turn (right over left); and
- The first unit in the intersection will have the right-of-way.

Stopped School Bus

All responding/traveling drivers shall obey stopping requirements for school buses with flashing lights. Drivers may only pass stopped busses if clearly directed to do so by the bus driver AND all red flashing lights on the bus have been turned off. Extreme caution shall be taken while passing a stopped school bus, and a speed of 15 mph shall not be exceeded.

Traveling in Opposing Traffic Lanes

Operating emergency vehicles in opposing traffic lanes is extremely hazardous and should only be done when absolutely necessary and limited to the shortest distance possible. Both visible and audible warning devices shall be used when in opposing lanes; however, exception may be made if travel is on a section of roadway that is verified closed with no oncoming traffic (i.e., interstate fully blocked with no traffic getting through).

When an emergency vehicle must travel in an opposing traffic lane or in a center turn lane to maneuver around slow moving or stopped traffic, speed shall not exceed the posted speed limit, and in most cases, should remain significantly below the posted speed limit to allow for sufficient reaction time.

When approaching a controlled intersection (traffic lights or stop signs) in an opposing traffic lane or center turn lane, the emergency vehicle should come to a full stop before entering the intersection, even if the traffic light is green in the direction of travel.

If there is a median separating the emergency vehicle from the slow or stopped traffic, the emergency vehicle should not exceed the posted speed limit (actual speed should depend on the road, traffic, and weather conditions).

Passing Traffic

When passing motorists, give other drivers adequate warning and opportunity to yield the right-of-way before passing. Emergency vehicle drivers must pass on the motorists' left side. If the motorists have stopped at an



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intersection making a left turn, or when the motorists have pulled to the extreme left of the roadway and indicated by their actions that they are aware of the emergency vehicle's presence, drivers may then pass on the motorists' right side.

Passing other responding vehicles is not permitted unless the leading vehicle communicates via radio that their vehicle may be passed. A following vehicle may initiate that radio communication requesting to pass.

Tandem Response

When responding in tandem with other emergency response vehicles (e.g., quick response vehicles, fire apparatus, law enforcement), vehicles should be spaced apart from one another so that other motorists will have a greater opportunity to discern that multiple vehicles are responding. Each responding vehicle should utilize a different siren pattern if responding in emergency mode.

Railroad Crossings

TRAINS ALWAYS HAVE THE RIGHT-OF-WAY. Extreme care needs to be taken while operating on or adjacent to railroad crossings and tracks.

Note that "normal" appearing highway vehicles, equipped with rail wheels, are also used by railroads and may be encountered at grade crossings.

Never attempt any railroad crossing if there is not enough room to completely cross and be able to stop the vehicle at least fifteen (15) feet from the tracks on the opposite side. At no time should any part of the vehicle be sitting over the tracks, even if the trains have been confirmed to be stopped.

At all unimproved (i.e., unguarded) grade level railroad crossings, the emergency vehicle shall turn off all audible warning devices and come to a full stop. All audible warning devices should be turned off and windows opened to listen for rail traffic; however, remember still that it is not always possible to hear an approaching train due to the Doppler Effect as well as the type of locomotives used on some rail lines (particularly electric locomotives). Only proceed after determining there is not a train approaching. If the crossing does not have a clear line of sight (i.e., obstructions, severe curves), a crew member should get out of the vehicle, check on crossing safety, and cautiously cross the tracks and wait clear of the tracks on the other side. Only then should the driver cross, proceeding fully through the crossing, and stop at least fifteen (15) feet from the tracks on the other side.

Caution should still be exercised at improved grade level crossings where warning lights and/or gates are provided. Warning devices and crossing gates are generally reliable but can fail due to the harsh conditions to which they are exposed, though these devices are designed to fail in the "safe" (i.e., active) mode.

When approaching a grade crossing with lowered gates and/or active lights and/or audible warning, the driver should stop the vehicle at least fifteen (15) feet away from the tracks. All audible warning devices should be turned off and windows opened to listen for rail traffic. The law prohibits the crossing of a grade level crossing while gates are lowering or in the down position and/or the signals are activated. Consider choosing an



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alternative route to the call. If an alternative route is not feasible, notify dispatch of the delay and when you clear the crossing. If necessary, request dispatch notify another agency on the other side of the tracks to respond.

If there are no alternatives and an emergency vehicle must cross an activated crossing, the following SHALL be followed WITHOUT EXCEPTION:

1. Have dispatch contact the train dispatch center. Alternatively, the crew can contact the train dispatch center directly by phone or radio or the train engineer directly by radio, if provided. The purpose of this contact is to both notify the railroad and train of the emergency need to cross AND to ensure that the train is not in a position where the emergency vehicle or personnel are in danger of being struck by the train.
 - a. Iowa Interstate Railroad (Durant area)
 - i. (800) 321-3891
 - ii. 161.220 MHz
 - b. Union Pacific (Highway 30 corridor)
 - i. (888) 877-7267
 - ii. 161.040 MHz
2. Upon confirmation, a crew member MUST walk out on the railroad crossing, confirm the safety of the emergency vehicle passage across all tracks looking both ways, and only then direct the driver to cross.
3. Only then should the driver cross, proceeding fully through the crossing, and stop at least fifteen (15) feet from the tracks on the other side.

Position Responsibilities

The driver’s primary responsibility is the safe operation of the vehicle. Whenever possible, ancillary functions should be the responsibility of the crew member in the passenger (“officer”) seat of the ambulance. This includes things like radio communications, mapping, operating the CAD, and looking up clinical operating guidelines. This allows the driver to remain primarily focused on the act of driving.

In addition to the duties above, the crew member in the passenger seat should make sure all passengers are seated and secured prior to the vehicle moving, ensure the driver is driving in a prudent manner and according to SOGs, assist the driver in clearing and crossing intersections, watch for road and physical hazards, serve as a spotter when backing, and other duties as needed.

BACKING

If you can avoid backing up, don’t back up. Drivers should never be in a hurry when backing or parking.

Ambulances

Spotters should be utilized whenever possible to help navigate backing ambulances; this may include the patient attendant looking out the back windows of the ambulance if this is the only option. The spotter should get out of the vehicle and check the passenger side and rear for any hazards or obstructions and then move to



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the driver’s side rear approximately 8-10 feet behind the vehicle in a position visible to the driver in the mirror. For vehicles with backup cameras, they are intended as an adjunct to, not a substitute for, the spotter. If a spotter is not available, the driver must ensure there are no hazards around the entire ambulance, and this may require the driver exiting to perform a full walk-around inspection of the ambulance prior to backing.

Emergency lights should be activated while backing ambulances, and if equipped, the backup alarm should be utilized. The backup alarm may be canceled while backing at the station provided the ambulance is out of the roadway and a backer is being utilized that can watch for and provide warning to others in the area.

The driver should open the front cab windows to hear voice prompts from the spotters or others around the vehicle or other warnings (i.e., horns). The spotter should use clear voice commands and the following hand signals to communicate with the driver:

- Straight back – One hand above the head with palm toward face waving back and the other hand at their side
- Turn – Both arms pointing the same direction with index fingers extended in the desired direction of travel
- Stop – Both arms raised and crossed in an “X” with the word “STOP” spoken loudly enough for the driver to hear

Non-Ambulance Vehicles

As these vehicles are frequently operated by a single responder, a spotter is not required, but it is still a best practice to use one if available.

Individual drivers must exercise caution while backing. Use mirrors and backup camera devices to visualize the intended path. If necessary, get out of the vehicle to visibly clear the area prior to backing.

If needing to backup with a trailer attached to the vehicle, a spotter should be utilized.

ALTERNATE DRIVERS

It is preferred that every effort be made to use an EMS staff member to drive the ambulance, or alternatively another county employee with emergency vehicle operations training (i.e., Sheriff’s deputy, EMA staff). However, if there are no other alternatives and both crew members are needed to care for a critical patient or multiple patients in the same ambulance, a member of another first response, fire, ambulance, or law enforcement agency may drive the ambulance.

ADDITIONAL PASSENGERS

Non-county responders and other specialty medical staff may accompany EMS crews in the patient compartment or cab of vehicles/ambulances and are not considered as "passengers" for the context of this guideline. They should remain seated with seatbelts fastened unless necessary for patient care or for patient and/or personnel safety (i.e., law enforcement action).



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Passengers, including patient relatives and friends, will be allowed only when necessary. Generally, when this is necessary, the passenger should be seated in the front right sight and secured with a seatbelt before the vehicle is in motion. Only one passenger should accompany the patient in the ambulance. If more than one person needs to be transported, alternative means of transport should be attempted (i.e., law enforcement).

A family member of a child or a special needs patient may be permitted to ride in the patient compartment if the situation warrants (i.e., child is upset, and family member is able to calm them; someone can help translate for a non-English speaking patient). The family member must be able to remain calm themselves and not get in the way of the crew providing necessary care. Anyone accompanying the patient in the patient compartment shall be seated in a seat with a seatbelt fastened. If it becomes necessary to have that individual move to a different seat due to patient care needs, the vehicle must be stopped prior to the individual moving. No passengers will be allowed to be unbelted while the vehicle is in motion.

Individual circumstances will dictate whether the child of an adult patient should be allowed to ride in the patient compartment. All children meeting car seat age must be secured in the ambulance in a car seat or approved pediatric restraint. If this cannot be done, alternative transportation must be used. Under no circumstances will a child be transported while simply being held on to by another individual.

Unless otherwise required by law, it is ultimately the decision of the senior crew member whether anyone other than the patient is allowed to accompany them in the ambulance. However, every attempt should be made to accommodate patient relatives and friends when possible, including seeking alternative transportation for them.