

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Police Driving Skills:  
The Need for Re-Current Training**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Tactical police driving is a task that police officers do on a daily basis during their police careers. However, aside from driver's education and a brief stint in their respective police academies, very little training occurs in police driving beyond the police academy. This is discouraging to note when the reality is that more law enforcement officers are killed every year in automobile accidents than all other line of duty deaths combined. This fact coupled with how litigious America is should prompt administrators to ensure officers receive proper training in every aspect of their job responsibilities. Training should have heavy emphasis on those areas that expose law enforcement to the highest levels of liability and scrutiny. Law enforcement administrators seem to be in tune with this need in regards to use of force and diversity/profiling issues. However, many fail to recognize the importance of training tactical driving skills that are used daily by law enforcement officers. In conducting tactical driving training on a regular basis, liability exposure will be reduced and, most importantly, officers are provided with a skill set that can go far in reducing or eliminating the unnecessary loss of officer's lives seen annually as a result of officer involved crashes.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction . . . . .	1
Position . . . . .	
Counter Position . . . . .	
Recommendation . . . . .	
References . . . . .	

## INTRODUCTION

The problem to be addressed is the lack of re-current training in regards to tactical police driving. With the litigious nature of society showing no signs of slowing, proper training of law enforcement officers in all aspects of their job is critical. The re-current training in those areas that consistently scrutinized and frequently litigated should be the focus of all law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement agencies routinely conduct training with strict qualifications annually or bi-annually in the area of response to resistance and aggression or use of force including but not limited to firearms, less lethal weapons. However, many law enforcement agencies are routinely deficient in the area of tactical driving training for their officers. Further, more officers are killed in the line of duty annually in vehicle accidents than by all other line of duty deaths combined. In fact, according to [www.LawMemorial.org](http://www.LawMemorial.org), 28 officers have died in traffic related accidents in the line of duty in the first half of 2014. Fifteen (or 54%) of those fatalities are single vehicle crashes. Law enforcement officers spend a significant amount of their day driving both in emergency and non- emergency situations, responding to calls for service and enforcing traffic laws. The citizens served by law enforcement agencies pay close attention to the driving habits of officers in their communities. They expect law enforcement officers in their community to be infallible in regards to the daily operation of police vehicles when it comes to obeying the traffic laws officers are sworn to enforce. Failure by officers to do so will draw the ire of their citizens, resulting in complaints lodged against officers for poor driving behavior.

Technology has also added a new wrinkle in how law enforcement officers are scrutinized by citizens. With the introduction of stricter legislation and new laws dealing

with distracted driving, regarding the use of cellular and other electronic devices inside vehicles, citizens pay close attention to how officer's conduct themselves with the technological distractions in their police vehicles. Although technological advances have made law enforcement officers more efficient in many aspects of their jobs, the introduction of technology inside police vehicles had created an environment loaded with distractions. Computer aided dispatch through mobile data computers, radios, camera equipment and radar units with remote control operation all combine to draw attention away from the task of driving. With new laws, municipal ordinances and celebrity campaigns dealing with distracted driving, specifically in the area of the use of cell phones while driving, some citizens will view law enforcement officers as hypocrites as officers attempt to enforce these laws and ordinances.

Through the research of journals, periodicals, books and expert opinions, this paper will bring into focus for law enforcement administrators, the undeniable fact that all law enforcement agencies should provide re-current tactical driving training for all sworn members of their respective agencies. In doing so, law enforcement agencies will be able to maintain a positive image with the communities they serve, reduce the liability associated with fleet accidents, and educate officers on utilizing technology to their advantage without allowing it to become a distraction when officers are behind the wheel of their patrol vehicle.

## **POSITION**

Law enforcement in today's society has become as much about risk assessment and risk management for law enforcement administrators as it is about enforcement action. Ross (2000) stated, "Training of personnel is a critical managerial responsibility

and is no longer observed as a luxury” (p. 170). Police administrators assume liability if for their officers if improper or insufficient training results in a violation of a citizens civil rights. Every task that is undertaken by law enforcement officers has the potential for litigation. This fact has forced administrators to create policy and adjust practices to keep pace with the ever-changing precedents established by the federal court rulings. The US Supreme Court's 1989 decision in *City of Canton V. Harris* served as a precedent that city's and their law enforcement agency can and will be held accountable for the actions of their officers if law enforcement agencies fail to train (489 US 378). *City of Canton v. Harris* served notice to municipalities that proper training is critical to managing risk within law enforcement organizations. But it is not enough to simply train personnel. Proper and re-current training is the key to developing and maintaining proper technique in the high risk tasks that law enforcement officers perform on a daily basis. Driving is no exception. Sanow (2006) stated that “Law enforcement officers are not very good at enforcement driving” (para. 1). In fact, he concluded that if driving skills could be measured as precisely as firearm skills, many officers would be reduced to walking a beat (Sanow, 2006).

Governmental insurance carriers are cognizant of this fact; insurance claims for fleet crashes are in the top five for all municipality payouts (Sanow, 2006). Officers operate their patrol vehicles in both defensive driving mindset, observing the presence and intention of others and offensive driving mindset, making others aware of the officer's presence and intentions. When an officer wrecks a vehicle during the course of a pursuit, media coverage is the first to hyper-analyze the actions of the pursuing officer. At times, some or all of the pursuit is captured on video from above with law

enforcement cynics critiquing every move the officer makes during the pursuit. This is just one area where proper training can make law enforcement shine. Although there are many variables officers cannot control while driving, officers who are trained and re-trained in proper driving techniques are able to reduce careless mistakes if not eliminate them altogether in some cases. One article stated, "Juries are typically impressed with the level and quality of training officers receive in emergency vehicle operations" (Sanow, 2006, para. 5)

Many law enforcement recruits arrive in agencies with minimal skills in most areas, just out of the academy, eager to hit the streets. Field training officers take these recruits and put them through a rigorous training program to prepare the young officer for the realities of police work. Each recruit faces procedural and practical application of their academy knowledge and is graded scored according to training performance requirements. These recruits possess a driver's license as one of the requirements for the profession. However, aside from driver's education and the limited training received in the academy, many have no measurable training in tactical police driving. Many of these recruits have never driven a vehicle that is equipped or has the performance capability of the modern day police vehicle. Inexperienced drivers and poor driving habits can be very costly to law enforcement agencies. This fact is not just limited to new or "green" officers either. Unfortunately, many law enforcement agencies fail to recognize or address this issue during the field training program or with re-current training. Recent statistical data indicates that from 1999 through 2008, officers killed in the line of duty while operating a motor vehicle account for more than 50% of all line of duty deaths (Noh, 2011). Surprisingly, the highest percentage of motor vehicle deaths

from 2000-2009 involved officers between 35-39 years of age with nine to ten years of service (Ashton, 2010). The next group was 20-29 years of age and this group accounted for 29% of the fatalities, 9% lower than their more experienced counterparts. Due to the amount of time officers spend driving during the course of their shifts, statistical data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration indicated that police officers are ten times more likely to be involved in an auto accident than the average citizen (Ramsey, 2010). As a result of this statistical data, it is clearly evident that re-current training in the area of tactical driving training should be a priority for law enforcement administrators. Law enforcement officers can be classified as controlling. It is a requirement of the job to take and maintain control of chaotic circumstances. If officers go untrained by their respective agencies, the likelihood of poor decision making as it aligns with departmental policy and procedure could lead to the assumption of unnecessary liability by the municipality and agency the officer represents (Oldham, 2001).

One final criticism that has drawn further scrutiny toward law enforcement officers driving habits is the push for tougher laws dealing with distracted driving. With the initiation of websites by companies such as AT&T's "It Can Wait" campaign, distracted driving has become a hot top among young adults with celebrity backing on television and radio commercials. As new laws are proposed and implemented, law enforcement officers are again faced potential public scrutiny, as the cockpits patrol vehicles are converted into technology storage compartments. As a result, officers expected to enforce the law, now find themselves engaging in behavior that they would normally take enforcement action against. This behavior could be perceived as

hypocritical by citizens in the community (Ashton, 2010). As mentioned earlier, the safe and proper operation of police vehicles is crucial to agency liability, officer and public safety. However, with technological advances designed to make law enforcement more efficient and professional, mobile data computers (MDC) computer aided dispatch (CAD) and in-car audio/video to name just a few. The concept of distracted driving is perhaps more prevalent in law enforcement than the citizens served. Due to this undeniable fact, law enforcement administrators must look at incorporating this into the tactical driving curriculum. Officers must be made aware of the dangers and educated on when and where to turn their attentions to the equipment inside their patrol vehicles. These habits must be taught and re-taught just like tactical driving techniques.

### **COUNTER POSITION**

Most law enforcement administrators have good intentions and a true desire to provide proper training to the members of their respective agencies. Unfortunately, administrators are faced with difficult budgetary decisions in regards to funding of their agencies. Because of this, training in general can be a casualty of budget cuts. Many agencies are aware of their annual state mandated training requirements and meeting those mandates is their priority. As a result, many agencies will avoid training that they see as costly. Tactical driving and training associated is not cheap. Texas Municipal League (TML), Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) and the National Academy of Professional Driving (NAPD) all offer courses in Emergency Vehicle Operation and can be quite costly. TEEX is a 50 hour course at 240.00 dollars per student. NAPD equipment and booklets will cost an agency approximately 2000.00 dollars to get started if agencies choose to do their own training. The reality is agencies

do not need to be extravagant in their training. An authorized trainer, empty parking lot and a few cones are all any agency needs to get started in training officers on proper driving techniques. However, as expensive as this training may seem to an agency administrator, when one considers a previously stated fact that “payouts for vehicle related claims are typically among the top five of all claims for municipality payouts” (Sanow, 2006, p. 4). As such, training costs become insignificant to the cost of liability claims paid out by agencies and municipalities. Tactical driving techniques, much like defensive tactic and firearm techniques are considered a perishable psychomotor skill and must be followed up with re-current training. As a result, officers revert back to poor habits which cannot only be a costly proposition for their agencies and municipalities, but can impact the public perception of officers patrolling their neighborhoods.

Another valid argument delivered by law enforcement administrators in regards to training and re-current training is the impact the training has on staffing. This is absolutely a factor to be considered by small to medium size agencies. When one considers vacation time, other training and unexpected time for illness and court appearances, the drain on manpower can be a huge factor. However, this problem is not unique to one agency or another. Many times, neighboring agencies are faced with the same issue and are actively seeking solutions to this very real problem. In response to this argument law enforcement administrators must become creative at times to accomplish their goals. Administrators must look at what resources are available and how to best put them to use. Many agencies experience issues with manpower in several aspects of daily operations. Many small agencies do not have the

resources to develop their own specialized units such as tactical operations teams, narcotics units, homicide units or general investigation units. As a result, agency administrators have pooled their resources with neighboring agencies to form regional Special Weapons and Tactical Teams (SWAT); multi-jurisdictional narcotic units and other specialized investigation units (Oldham, 2001). This type of teamwork is needed to enhance the ability of smaller agencies to be able to address operational issues that are faced on a daily basis. Keeping with this, the same principle can be applied to training. Utilizing the cooperation from neighboring agencies, administrators will be able to pool their resources and conduct vital training in the area of tactical police driving that ultimately becomes a benefit to all of the surrounding agencies.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Tactical police driving is a daily occurrence that consumes most of a law enforcement officer's daily activity. Driving, whether it is done at low speed, low risk or high speed, high risk, can prove costly if law enforcement officers are trained improperly or not trained at all. As a result, it is imperative that law enforcement administrators ensure that their respective agencies provide re-current training in the field of tactical police driving. The Supreme Court ruling in *City Of Canton, Ohio v. Harris* (1989) has established precedent for law enforcement agencies and their responsibility to train officers in regards to the daily tasks they perform and laws they enforce. Failure to train resulting in violation of a citizen's civil rights, according to, *Canton v Harris*, will lead to municipalities and agencies to shoulder the liability for the actions of their officers. (*City Of Canton v. Harris*, 1989) If this training is conducted on a regular basis, police

agencies and the municipalities they serve can significantly reduce their liability exposure resulting from fleet accidents.

Further, proper training of officers, young and old, will provide the psycho motor skills to operate police vehicles safely in emergency and non- emergency mode. There are many factors that lead to poor decisions behind the wheel of a patrol car. Two such factors are overconfidence and lack of confidence. Overconfidence stems from a sense of invulnerability or an “it won’t happen to me” mentality. Lack of confidence is equally as dangerous and simply comes from a lack of experience driving under specific circumstances (Beach, Morris & William, 1993).

Proper training in a controlled environment allows law enforcement officers to push the limits of not only the police vehicle, but their individual skill level as well. Allowing officers to drive to the limit in a controlled environment provides them with invaluable knowledge as it relates to their equipment and skill. This knowledge translates to better decision making behind the wheel in real time emergency and non-emergency driving. As stated earlier and supported with statistical data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more officers, upwards of 50%, are killed in the line of duty in motor vehicle accidents than, all other line of duty deaths combined. This statistic, along with aforementioned current data from [www.LawMemorial.org](http://www.LawMemorial.org), stated that 28 officers have died in traffic related accidents in the line of duty in the first half of 2014. Fifteen (or 54%) of those fatalities are single vehicle crashes, should be seen by law enforcement administrators as a driving factor for continuing education in the area of tactical police driving. Law enforcement officers, in general, will commonly comment the goal of every shift is to go home safely to their

families at the end of the day. Proper training is without a doubt one way of the most significant ways to reduce the number of motor vehicle fatalities among law enforcement agencies.

Law enforcement agencies must also be aware of the impact that technology has had on driving skills. Although in-car computers; CAD, audio/video equipment, radios and radar equipment allow for more efficiency in officers daily tasks, technology also creates numerous distractions inside the modern day police car. With legislations and laws addressing distracted driving along with campaigns such as AT&T's "it can wait" campaign discouraging texting and driving coming to the forefront, law enforcement administrators must be prepared to train officers on the proper and timely use of technology to avoid claims of hypocrisy by the citizens and community law enforcement serves.

As in many instances as it relates to training, cost and budget are always problematic for law enforcement administrators when attempting to coordinate and provide necessary training. However, like many of the high risk tasks that are trained upon, tactical driving skills are a perishable skill. If not continually trained upon and reinforced, skills will diminish and poor driving habits will most likely return. Personnel and staffing concerns are also valid arguments. However, like many small agencies have done when it comes to specialized units, SWAT, narcotics, investigations, many agencies are turning to multi-jurisdiction units to address and overcome that lack of resources. Multi-jurisdictional training units can be developed and utilized to overcome staffing concerns and will serve to benefit all agencies involved.

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