

Fire Commissioners Column.....

Bill Madison

It seems like whenever someone has an emergency and is not sure what to do they call the fire department. We get “emergency” calls covering the gambit, from animals stuck in trees and chimneys to broken water pipes and flooded basements. We evaluate babies with fevers, help return elderly folks to bed and sometimes rescue people from cave-ins. About three-fourths of the calls we get are medical emergencies and as our population ages I expect this trend will continue to grow. Although firefighting is our major purpose we have become the community’s “safety net” in many ways. It’s even been said that the fire department is incorrectly named and should be called the “Emergency Department”. Several years ago a prominent national fire official made the statement that the fire department is actually an emergency response organization that occasionally responds to fires.

I’m not complaining, just reminiscing over how our role has evolved over the past decades. Change is enviable and we either embrace it or get sent out to pasture. The fire service has always been there when needed and will continue to be as long as our citizens support our communities. Obviously your tax contributions support many of our financial needs but we also need your support as volunteers to staff our equipment and respond to emergencies. We are a “combination” fire department made up of a few career, paid firefighters and many volunteer firefighters. We are heavily dependent upon our volunteers and are always looking for more. If you think you might be able to help us out, I encourage you to make it one of your New Year’s resolutions to call or drop by your nearest fire station and talk with us. We’ll train and equip you and I’ll guarantee that you’ll learn a lot and have some fun too.

One of the most frequent calls we respond to are motor vehicle accidents, MVA’s. It’s always amazed me how cavalier we are as we drive thousands of pounds of steel and glass down the road often with our most prized possessions, our family inside. Driving becomes so routine that we seldom ponder the horrible consequences of a momentary lapse in judgment. Drivers talking on cell phones (even though it’s illegal), more engrossed in the conversation than driving are an all too common sight. I’ve even observed people combing their hair, putting on make-up or even reading the newspaper while moving down the road!

I can’t even begin to describe the horrific automobile accident scenes I’ve witnessed. I’m sure many of those drivers wished they could turn back the clock and pay more attention to their driving skills in those last few seconds before their lives were permanently changed. Driving a car is serious business! Driving in winter weather is an additional challenge. Let’s review some winter driving tips that might make a difference to ensure we arrive at our destinations in one piece.

You can’t safely drive a car if you can’t see where you’re going! How many times have you seen someone driving with only a little peephole cleared in the windshield? Be sure

to scrape all the windows, front, side and rear before you take off. Don't forget your outside mirrors and headlights and if you're clearing snow, be sure to get it off the entire car. If you don't it may slid off the roof or hood and block your view or fly into someone else's windshield and cause them to smash into you.

When driving in snow, **DO EVERYTHING SLOWLY!** Even if you maintain control of your car, not everyone else will. In snow, your tires are just barely grabbing the road. Accelerate, turn and brake gently. Anticipate, rapid movements lead to skids and loss of control. *Ordinary drivers* react to road conditions. *Good drivers* anticipate potential crises and avoid them.

Generally, plan on it taking twice the normal distance to stop your car on snow or ice as it would to stop on dry pavement. One of the braking techniques I learned in an emergency vehicle handling course I took was the heel and toe braking maneuver for use on slick roads. If your vehicle does not have antilock brakes keep your heel on the floor and use your toes to repeatedly tap on the brakes till stopped. Never lock the wheels. If you have antilock brakes, use the same heel and toe method but don't remove your toes from the brake pedal till you have come to a complete stop.

We've all learned that if the car goes into a skid we should turn the wheels in the direction of the skid. If the rear of the car skids to the right, turn the wheels to the right. If the rear skids left, turn the wheels left. Another simple way to remember this it to steer in the direction you want your car to go. Also, if you start to skid, don't brake. It's a good idea to disconnect the driving force to the drive wheels. To do this you simply shift an automatic transmission from drive to neutral or depress the clutch if you have a manual transmission.

Finally, it's a good idea to have at least a basic understanding of how your car's antilock braking system or traction control system works. Check out the owner's manual or have someone explain these to you. If you are driving a different car this winter and have not handled it in slick weather, it's not a bad idea to go to a parking lot after a fresh snow and test the handling characteristics of the vehicle before you venture out on the roads.

Leave early, buckle up, take it easy and have a safe trip.

Happy Holidays from the career and volunteer staffs of Steven County Fire Protection district #1.