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Report of the Week

The sixth sense effect

2/15/08

Report Number: 08-017

Report Date: 01/10/2008 1253

Demographics

Department type: Volunteer

Job or rank: Fire Chief

Department shift: Respond from home

Age: 52 - 60

Years of fire service experience: 24 - 26

Region: FEMA Region IX

Event Information

Event type: Vehicle event: responding to, returning from, routine driving, etc.

Event date and time: 11/13/2007 0955

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Do you think this will happen again?

What do you believe caused the event?

- Human Error
- Decision Making
- Individual Action
- Situational Awareness

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Property damage
- Life threatening injury
- Minor injury

Event Description

I received a page to respond to a medical aid in our district. I have been a volunteer for over 20 years and sometimes your sixth sense kicks in. As I left to respond to this call, I had an uneasy feeling. I arrived at the station, pulled our engine out and proceeded down the driveway. I stopped at the end of the driveway with my lights on and looked both directions. I looked not once, not twice but three times. The third time I looked it was still clear. I proceeded to pullout onto the roadway when out of nowhere and I do mean NOWHERE, a vehicle at a high rate of speed was bearing down on me. My choices were to stop and have this vehicle hit me in the pump panel or to continue and hope that I would be able to get out of the way. I chose the latter. By doing this, I might have saved this persons life. The driver hit me in the left rear compartment and tailboard instead of dead center in the pump panel. Her car was totaled and both airbags deployed. The only injury she sustained was a cut lip from teeth when the airbag hit her. After the collision, her car ended up about 150' beyond the point of impact in the landscaping in front of our station. This kept her from doing more damage to herself. Some information that was provided to me later revealed that she was texting on her cell phone prior to the collision. Her yaw

marks on her tires indicated a speed of 62+ mph in a 40 mph zone. She was on a learners permit without a licensed driver with her.

Lessons Learned

Chain of Events: Listen to your sixth sense. Sometimes this will help you to keep yourself out of trouble. We as firefighters often don't pay attention to our sixth sense like we should. If your gut feeling is that something isn't quite right chances are it isn't. Experience is a good teacher but not at the costs of injury to yourself or others. Decision making: I feel that in this situation I had made the best decision given what the circumstances were. I will always question myself if it was the right thing to do. Always expect the unexpected. I learned that from this incident. Situational awareness: After this incident, we took a good look at our surroundings. The roadway where this happened, the speed of other vehicles at 60+ to 70+ MPH (in a 40 MPH zone) clocked on radar by the Safety Officer. The topography of the roadway is a factor because of the dip in the roadway to our stations left where a car can not be seen and the car can not see us. I feel the roadway dip, the high rate of speed of the vehicle, and the drivers inattention, were the biggest contributing factors to this incident.

Discussion Questions

As you read through this week's report, one question will probably come to mind; what more could done on the part of the emergency vehicle driver to prevent this occurrence? Even when we do everything right an unwanted outcome may still result. The concept is to minimize the effect of the errors or violations. The point to this week's report is recognizing the "sixth sense" and reacting to it at the earliest possible opportunity. After you read the complete report, consider the following:

1. Recall *your* last "sixth sense" event. When did you recognize the unsettling feeling?
2. What was your role in the incident (i.e., decision maker, subordinate, etc.)?
3. If you were in a subordinate role, did you speak up or keep your thoughts to yourself?
4. If you occupy a leadership position, do you maintain an environment where your crew can speak up freely if something doesn't feel right to them?
5. How much of a role does experience play in the "sixth sense?"

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.