

# promoting safety in the workplace

wellness and safety for EMS practitioners is an important message to deliver during EMS Week



By Glenn Luedtke

*Editor's Note: Safety — for providers and patients alike — has always been important, but has taken on additional significance in the past several years as the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP) has been part of a collaborative effort to develop “A National Strategy to Create a Culture of Safety in EMS.”*

*The project is the result of a three-year cooperative agreement between ACEP and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), with support from the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) EMS for Children (EMSC) Program. It stems from a recommendation from the National EMS Advisory Committee, created in 2007 to provide guidance to the U.S. Department of Transportation and the NHTSA Office of EMS. The project is led by an 18-member steering committee made up of representatives from national EMS organizations and chaired by ACEP's representative, Sabina Braithwaite, MD, MPH, FACEP.*

*The document is currently in its fourth draft and is scheduled for completion in September 2013. While changing the culture of EMS to embrace safety is a long-term vision spanning many years, it's important to realize that there are important steps EMS practitioners, agencies and organizations can take now to move this effort forward. For more information about the project, go to [emscultureofsafety.org](http://emscultureofsafety.org).*

Safety, for EMS practitioners, their patients and the general public, is recognized as increasingly important. In conjunction with EMS Week, here are a few ideas that individual practitioners, their agencies and organizations can implement *now* to help make our workplace safer for everyone.



## EMS practitioners can:

### Speak up

You need to communicate with your partner when you see something that doesn't seem right, even if it means questioning the actions of someone more experienced than you.

### Maintain situational awareness

When working in the roadway, be sure to wear the appropriate vest and keep a vigilant eye for oncoming traffic.

### Take care of your tools

Your vehicle is your living. Respect it and take care of it. Respond aggressively to

any safety concerns — and don't “pencil whip” the checklist. The same goes for your many battery-powered devices — the most common cause of battery failure is lack of proper maintenance.



### Drive like a professional

We spend hours refreshing and updating our medical knowledge and skills, yet we spend little or no time examining our driving habits. Driving under emergency conditions is an important part of our job and we need to be as good at that

as we are at doing a patient assessment. And texting while driving is absolutely forbidden.

### Watch your back

In this case, that means knowing how to lift safely and making sure you have enough help to avoid hurting your back. The sad fact is that one out of every four EMS workers will suffer a career-ending back injury within the first four years of service. We can do better than that.

### Protect yourself from violence

Patients, relatives or crowds can become difficult if they don't understand why you're not moving toward the hospital. If verbal de-escalation doesn't work and things look like they're going to turn ugly, get out as soon as you can.



### Take care of your body

It can be challenging to eat properly while you're working on an ambulance, but planning ahead can eliminate over-reliance on junk food. Many of us have to work more than one job to make a decent living, but make sure you get enough rest. When you're overtired, you're not only more likely to make mistakes, but also to get injured. And you can do simple exercises and stretches while on duty.

### Take an EMS safety course

Courses are available from the National Association of EMTs, independent educators and manufacturers to increase your awareness of safety issues and provide information on ways to stay safe in the ambulance and on the scene.

### Be willing to report errors and near misses

Find out if your department has a system where you can report near misses, patient or provider injuries or other safety incidents without fear of unfair retaliation. If they don't have one, work with your administration to have them participate in one of the near miss data bases currently available — and make sure they provide feedback to help you work safer and avoid injuries.

### EMS administrators and agencies can:

#### Adopt the values of "Just Culture"

"Just Culture" and other similar organizational strategies create an atmosphere of trust in which employees are encouraged to provide essential safety-related information instead of hiding errors out of fear of retribution.

#### Provide practical, useful education on EMS safety to your practitioners

Include safety-related information in new member orientations, as well as in continuing education. These can include topics such as safety awareness, emergency vehicle operation training, patient lifting and moving techniques, self defense training, and nutritional education, as well as other training customized to the needs of your service.

#### Evaluate your shift scheduling system

Are your personnel chronically fatigued? Is your service experiencing errors that could be attributed to long shifts, overtime requirements or other factors that keep your people from getting proper rest? Your shift schedules may be part of the cause. Compare your scheduling strategies to those of other agencies and talk to your people about ways you can meet the needs of your service without endangering your personnel and their patients due to fatigue.



### Consider safety when you order your next ambulance

Include a representative from your agency's safety committee in the specification process. Look at what others are doing to enhance the safety of their personnel inside the ambulance and contact organizations involved in EMS vehicle safety research to promote a better, safer ambulance.

### Provide clear safety guidelines for your personnel

Address such common issues as use of warning lights and sirens, speed, use of restraints by *all* occupants of the ambulance, and the use of cell phones and texting. Let your people know what you expect.

### Everyone can:

#### Talk the talk

Be an advocate for safety with your crew, your station and your department. Encourage your employees and co-workers to use safety best practices, and be willing to step up and question practices that you believe are unsafe or could be done more safely. Support the concept of "Just Culture," and encourage your colleagues to give safety the same importance that they give to providing quality care.

#### Walk the walk

Don't just talk about safety— be the example! Do the job safely and encourage others to follow your example. Be the "safety mentor" for your colleagues, subordinates and particularly for new EMTs and paramedics who look to you to show them how the job should be done on the street.

# safety resources

*The following are a few examples of what national EMS organizations are doing to help providers and agencies develop safety awareness and training.*

## **National Association of EMTs (NAEMT)** ([naemt.org](http://naemt.org))

NAEMT has several projects aimed at improving the safety of EMS practitioners and their patients including:

- **EMS Safety Course** The course called “Taking Safety To The Streets” includes eight modules representing all phases of EMS work and is approved by CECBEMS for eight hours of CE.
- **Physical Fitness Guidelines for EMS Practitioners** NAEMT is collaborating with the American Council on Exercise to develop suggested physical fitness guidelines for EMS practitioners which will take into consideration the variety of EMS delivery models and environments within which EMS operates. The guidelines will be based on the physical requirements needed to perform the variety of tasks done by EMTs and paramedics, and will help EMS agencies in recruitment and retention of EMS practitioners, and ultimately, help reduce the number and severity of injuries on the job. Suggested guidelines will be published by early 2013.

## **The Center for Leadership, Innovation and Research (CLIR) in EMS** ([event.clirems.org](http://event.clirems.org))

In collaboration with NAEMT and the National EMS Management Association, CLIR created the EMS Voluntary Event Notification Tool (E.V.E.N.T.) system to provide for anonymous reporting of near miss, line-of-duty death and patient safety incidents. Data is analyzed and used to develop policies and procedures, training, and to prevent similar events from

happening in the future. Aggregate reports are made available to agencies, while no individual responses are shared with other parties.

## **The International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF)** ([iaff.org](http://iaff.org))

The IAFF has done considerable work evaluating a variety of shift strategies for their personnel, and has numerous online resources covering such subjects as specific hazards faced by EMS providers, crew configuration strategies, and an electronic tool kit for EMS leaders.

## **The International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC)** ([iafc.org](http://iafc.org))

The IAFC sponsors the National Fire Fighter Near-Miss Reporting System. The system is a voluntary, confidential, non-punitive and secure reporting system with the goal of improving firefighter safety. Submitted reports are reviewed by fire service professionals. Identifying descriptions are removed to protect your identity. The report is then posted on the IAFC website for use as a learning tool.

## **The EMS Safety Foundation (EMSSF)** ([emssafetyfoundation.org](http://emssafetyfoundation.org))

EMSSF is a nonprofit think tank consortium and institute with a mission to promote and enhance EMS safety, innovation, collaboration, research, knowledge and education. Activities include monthly webinars on a variety of EMS safety topics.

## **Transportation Research Board (TRB) of the National Academies of Science** ([objectivesafety.net/TRBSubcommittee.htm](http://objectivesafety.net/TRBSubcommittee.htm))

The EMS Safety Subcommittee of the TRB is interdisciplinary in nature and shares a common interest in advancing EMS and medical transportation safety research. The subcommittee meets as part of the TRB’s annual symposium in Washington, D.C.

## **National Fire Protection Association (NFPA)** ([nfpa.org](http://nfpa.org))

NFPA 1917 is the “Standard for Automotive Ambulances,” establishing the minimum requirements for the design, performance and testing of new automotive ambulances used for out-of-hospital medical care and patient transport.

## **National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)**

([cdc.gov/niosh](http://cdc.gov/niosh))

NIOSH is currently engaged in a collaborative project with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Office of EMS aimed at identifying occupational injuries and illnesses among EMS workers. Research will be conducted to provide a detailed description of non-fatal occupational injuries and illnesses incurred by EMS practitioners. This includes reviewing the nature, circumstances and outcomes of the injuries and illnesses as well as the characteristics of the injured or ill workers.

## **Defensive Training for EMS (DT4EMS)** ([dt4ems.com](http://dt4ems.com))

D4EMS is one of a number of private firms that provide training to help protect EMS providers from being assaulted, and how to protect themselves if they are assaulted.

## **FernoWashington** ([ferno.com](http://ferno.com))

Ferno’s online training program called “Injury Free” features a series of short videos about nutrition, exercise, management of stress and fatigue, patient lifting techniques, and injury prevention, all from an EMS perspective.

*Glenn Luedtke has more than 50 years experience as a paramedic, educator and administrator, and serves as NAEMT’s representative on the Steering Committee for the “Creating a Strategy for a Culture of Safety in EMS” project.*