

HILLSDALE

A WORD ABOUT TRAFFIC STOPS:

BY POLICE OFFICER JEFF ANGERMEYER, ON BEHALF OF POLICE CHIEF CHIP STALTER

Whether it's a state trooper on a major highway or a local police officer from a small town, cops have been taught to begin a traffic encounter in the same way regardless. The theory behind this is to promote uniformity within the profession and to ensure the safety of everyone involved. While an individual officer's style in handling a traffic stop may vary, there are many constants that all motorists can expect if stopped by police. Here is a brief explanation of some of the mainstays that have been integrated into the traffic stop routine by almost all police officers.

Promptly Pull to the Right

Firstly, police officers may effect a traffic stop of an automobile if they believe that a traffic violation has occurred, criminal activity is afoot, or if a police officer has a belief that the driver is in danger.

Ideally, a police officer will follow the vehicle while certain computer inquiries are executed, checking for active warrants or the like. When the overhead emergency lights are activated or a blast of the siren is heard, the officer is signaling to the driver that he or she must pull over. This is noteworthy because police officers may follow a vehicle first until there is a wide enough, safe enough, and bright enough area in which both the vehicle in question and the police car can properly yield at the side of the road.

For example, effecting a traffic stop along a dark curve on a winding roadway in the middle of the night would be less than ideal. Therefore, time permitting, an officer on patrol will select the place and moment to activate the lights and siren.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF POLICE OFFICER JEFF ANGERMEYER

Police Officer Brian McKeever is pictured on the radio during traffic stop.

Consequently, and pursuant to the traffic code, drivers shall promptly yield to the right side of the roadway upon signal given by a police officer; drivers should never pull to the left-hand edge of the roadway or continue driving aimlessly in an effort to look for somewhere to stop. More likely than not, the police officer has already anticipated, timed and selected the appropriate place for this traffic stop to occur.

'License, Registration & Insurance, Please'

Once pulled to the right, a police officer may take a moment to communicate information via radio and to make certain observations about the car in question before approaching on foot. During the few moments that it takes a police

officer to reach the window of the car and speak with the driver, it is NOT advisable to begin sifting through the glove compartment or center console looking for the requisite driving credentials. While the driver clearly knows and understands that a police officer is approaching, the police officer does not know who he or she is

approaching. Therefore, cops may become suspicious of those inside the car—perhaps needlessly—if the driver or passengers are spotted reaching for or grabbing at things in the cabin. The best advice is to stay seated in the car, place the vehicle into park, and wait for the officer.

Typically, the police officer will approach at the driver's window to collect his or her credentials and engage the motorist in conversation. Sometimes,

however, a police officer may opt to approach from the passenger side, staying away from passing traffic. In either instance, cops are taught to be cautious, use their flashlights at nighttime, and their position on the outside of the vehicle to their advantage. This allows them as much view of those inside the car as possible.

Normally, the first order of business for a police officer on a traffic stop is to collect the operator's license, the vehicle's registration card, and a valid insurance card. Officers are trained to obtain these documents first, prior to any conversation—and in particular—prior to discussing the reason for the traffic stop. Since the motorist is obligated by law to surrender their driving credentials anyway, it is the first logical step in a traf-

POLICE DEPARTMENT GETTING PULLED OVER BY THE POLICE

fic stop and further allows the police officer to identify the person behind the wheel. With that step completed, cops are trained to explain the reason for the stop and pose any questions thereafter. In fairness, it is only natural to know who one is speaking with, before engaging in a dialogue. Since police officers are wearing a readily identifiable badge and nametag, the driver's license becomes the primary means to place a name to an otherwise unknown motorist.

The officer will usually return to the police car and verify the driving credentials. Very often, drivers may notice a second police unit arrive and park next to the officer who initially stopped them. During a traffic stop, it is standard operating procedure for a nearby police unit to pass by and even stop to

join an officer engaged in an encounter with a motorist.

The Conclusion: Summons or Warning

While no one enjoys receiving a summons, the fact is police officers do cite motorists for traffic violations. However, sometimes a police officer will issue a verbal or written warning in lieu of a traffic citation. The law allows an officer to use his or her judgment and discretion in deciding which conclusion will be adopted. Very often, the severity of the violation at hand or simply the number of violations detected by the officer will become prevailing factors that are considered at the conclusion of a traffic stop.

For example, a distracted motorist who has been clocked on R.A.D.A.R. in excess of the speed limit, talking on a cell

phone, and not wearing a seat-belt, has exhibited three quite obvious traffic infractions. It will be at the officer's discretion to issue one, two, or even all three summonses.

Regardless of a specific outcome, officers generally avoid debating the traffic code with motorists or lecturing drivers. The proper venue for contesting a traffic summons or scrutinizing the traffic code is in a court of law under the moderation of an impartial judge. Officers will answer some questions; but it becomes ineffective and counterproductive to prolong a traffic stop by arguing with drivers who become hostile. In the end, drivers are advised to question a summons in court and not at the side of the road. A police officer cannot take back a summons that has been issued, and neither can police supervisors,

whose primary concerns are of an officer's misconduct or malfeasance in the line of duty.

Residents Can Help

In the end, traffic stops are fluid situations that can be unique, despite a police officer's best attempts to standardize these encounters. Since residents of Hillsdale are widely regarded as helpful partners of the police department, local cops hope that residents can understand how important traffic safety is for everyone who lives and works in town. Being pulled over by the police department is a natural extension of promoting traffic safety throughout town. By cooperating with police officers and practicing courteous driving, residents can make Hillsdale a safe place for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other cars on the road.

Do's

In addition to the typical steps mentioned in the article, "A Word About Traffic Stops: Getting Pulled Over by the Police," here are some specific things that drivers can do to facilitate a cordial traffic stop:

- Place the car into park and turn the engine off;
- At nighttime, activate the vehicle's interior overhead light for added visibility;
- Roll down the driver's window completely;
- Turn off or mute the FM Radio;
- Roll down any tinted windows to reveal the inside of the automobile for the approaching officer;
- Keep your hands visible;
- Make sure you have your driving credentials and they are up to date before getting on the road.



Sgt. Dan McLaughlin issues a summons during a traffic stop.