

Distracted drivers

When you're in a work zone, take extra precautions to stay safe

The accident: A seven-man crew had set up a construction zone on a two-lane highway in order to repair damaged guardrails along one side of the road. In preparation for closing one lane, the crew had placed alert signs in each direction of travel prior to stopping traffic, but did not use barrels. A flagger stepped out into the road with his back to oncoming traffic and was struck by a passenger car traveling approximately 55 mph. He was transported to a hospital where he was pronounced dead from blunt impact injuries to the head, trunk and extremities, combined with multiple skeletal and visceral injuries.

The bottom line: A post-accident investigation determined the flagger had stepped into the lane of travel before oncoming traffic had been stopped. Facing the flagger controlling the other lane, he failed to see vehicles approaching. Although warning signs were in place and the flagger was wearing high-vis apparel, the driver of the car said the sun was in his eyes and he did not see the flagger until striking him.



Illustration by Don Lomax

Work zone worries

While construction work is always going to present dangers not encountered in other professions, work zones can be particularly problematic because you're adding the unpredictability of passenger vehicles to the mix. With that in mind, here are some tips to help you stay safe when working around traffic.

Assume you're invisible. If you're going to make an assumption about drivers, assume they don't see you at all. Drivers are bombarded with distractions, and you have no way to know if they are paying attention. They may be texting, eating, talking or simply running late – all situations that contribute to distracted driving. If you believe they don't see you, you're more likely to practice safe behavior and stay out of their path.

Properly set up traffic control. The

Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices has a specific set of requirements for setting up work zones, depending upon the number of lanes closed, volume of traffic and length of road. Alert your crew leader if the setup seems inadequate. Before you close the lane, ensure the buffer space provides adequate sight distance for a vehicle to see and respond to the work zone signs.

Never enter the path of oncoming traffic. Stand at the shoulder of the road next to the lane of traffic you're controlling, and never enter the lane of traffic. Also, avoid the impulse to turn around to communicate with the other lane's flagger, because this will place your back to traffic. Instead, use two-way radios to communicate, which will allow you to maintain eye contact with the drivers in your lane.

Information for this Safety Watch was obtained from an accident report, the Center for Disease Control's NIOSH Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation program and the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. It is meant for general information only.

Date of safety talk: _____ Leader: _____
 Attending: _____

