

TRAFFIC ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION

1. **PURPOSE:** To establish uniform policies and procedures for investigating motor vehicle accidents that occur within the Department's jurisdiction.
2. **POLICY:** The Huntsville Police Department will investigate and report traffic accidents occurring within the city limits of Huntsville. The level of investigation will be based upon the nature, severity, and location of the accident.
3. **SCOPE:** This written directive is applicable to all Sworn, Records, and Communications personnel.
4. **RESPONSIBILITY:** All affected personnel will comply with this written directive.
5. **DEFINITION:** The term "DELAYED ACCIDENT" is defined as any accident where all aspects of state law have been complied with, yet the police were not contacted at the time of the initial incident.
6. **PROCEDURES**
 - A. **GENERAL:** Any Officer dispatched to investigate a traffic accident, or who discovers an accident while in a police vehicle, will ensure the accident is investigated in a thorough and professional manner.
 1. If traffic accident investigation is not normally within the Officer's job assignment, that Officer will be responsible for notifying Communications to send another Officer to investigate the accident.
 2. If immediate police action is required, the initial officer (regardless of his/her job assignment) will stand by with the accident until the investigating Officer arrives.
 - B. **ACCIDENT REPORTING:** Non-injury, minor and non-serious traffic accidents generally require the reporting of basic information (i.e., Alabama Uniform Traffic Accident Form or Huntsville Police Department Miscellaneous Service Report). A more thorough investigation is required on the following types of traffic accidents:
 1. Death or injury (serious and visible injuries);
 2. Major or significant property damage;
 3. Leaving the scene;
 4. Impairment due to alcohol and/or drugs; or
 5. Hazardous materials.

C. **LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSE, GENERAL:** Officers will respond to the following types of traffic accidents:

1. Death or injury (serious and visible injuries);
2. Leaving the scene;
3. Impairment of an operator due to alcohol and/or drugs;
4. Damage to public vehicle or property;
5. Accidents involving shipments of hazardous materials;
6. Disturbances between principals;
7. Major traffic congestion as a result of the accident;
8. Damage to vehicles to the extent towing is required; or
9. Any other accident as dispatched; and
10. Private property accidents involving death, injury, a disturbance reported, a city vehicle involved, alcohol or drugs involved, public property damaged or where it cannot be determined that there are no injuries.

Officers will not be dispatched to private property traffic accidents that do not meet the above criteria. Communications personnel will inform the calling party to exchange information and to contact their insurance company.

D. **SERIOUS ACCIDENT RESPONSE:** One or more Officers will respond to the scene of a serious or complex accident to provide emergency services, investigate the accident, record short-lived evidence, and restore the normal flow of traffic. In less serious accidents, the existing workload and availability of Officers will influence Officer response.

E. **INCLEMENT WEATHER RESPONSE:** During periods of inclement weather with extremely poor road conditions, a Shift Commander may place Officers on limited accident response. During these times accident reporting will be curtailed. Non-injury accidents where vehicles can be driven, and involve no previously mentioned factors, such as "Driving Under the Influence," would normally not be investigated.

1. Communications personnel will respond to citizens' requests by informing them of the above information and by instructing them to exchange necessary information.
2. Area news agencies should be advised of the decision to halt report taking as soon as possible. This information may be given to the news media through the Media Paging System as needed.

F. **FIRST OFFICER ON THE SCENE:** Immediately upon arriving at the accident scene, the first Officer will:

1. Check accident victims for injuries, administer first aid (where practical), provide for basic life support and notify a supervisor of the status of any injuries. Injury status should be indicated using the following terms in the officer's best judgement:
 - a. No injury;
 - b. Minor injury;
 - c. Serious but not life threatening injury;
 - d. Possible life threatening injury; or
 - e. Fatality involved.
2. Request ambulance and/or additional assistance (e.g., additional assist Officers, Rescue Squad, tow truck, etc.);
3. Provide fire suppression services, where practical, until the Fire Department arrives; and
4. Protect the accident scene. Officers will accomplish this by parking their patrol vehicle in such a manner as to shield the accident scene. Police emergency lights will be activated while the vehicle is in the roadway.
5. Officers will preserve short-lived evidence;
6. Establish a safe traffic pattern around the scene;
7. Locate witnesses and record accident information; and
8. Expedite the removal of vehicles, persons, and debris. This practice is necessary to the safety of Officers and the public and must be done quickly.
 - a. Failure to expedite removal from the roadway of vehicles involved in accidents results in unnecessary congestion and may be a contributing factor in additional serious collisions, especially on high-speed and limited-access highways.
 - b. Whenever possible, motorists should be encouraged to remove vehicles from the roadway. This should be limited to accidents which do not involve injuries and have only property damage. This practice should be communicated to motorists on a semi-annual basis by the Police Communications Relations Officer in cooperation with the news media (Public Service Announcement).

G. **INVESTIGATIVE RESPONSIBILITY:** The first Officer to arrive on the accident scene is responsible for investigating the accident, and is in charge of the accident scene, unless otherwise designated by a supervisor, and/or Vehicular Homicide Investigator.

1. When a supervisor has been notified of serious or life threatening injuries, that supervisor will be responsible for requesting a Crime Scene Unit or other investigating Officer(s) to respond, where appropriate.
2. In those instances where another agency is on the scene of the accident prior to the arrival of a Huntsville Police unit, the H.P.D. Officer will provide whatever services are needed to complete the investigation. This may include writing the report if necessary, providing traffic control or calling for emergency assistance.

H. **ACCIDENT SCENE PROCEDURES:** When investigating accidents, the Officer will insure that the “Alabama Uniform Traffic Accident Report” is filled out completely and accurately, using the State of Alabama eCRASH computer system. The report will document the investigation, to include:

1. Interviewing principals and witnesses;
2. Examining and recording vehicle damage;
3. Examining/recording effects of the accident on the roadway, or other public or private property;
4. Taking measurements, as appropriate;
5. Diagramming the accident scene;
6. Taking photographs, as appropriate; and
7. Collecting and preserving evidence. If extensive or complex measurements, photographs, and/or collection and preservation of evidence is needed, the supervisor at the scene will request a Traffic Homicide Investigator.
8. The officer will facilitate exchange of information among principals. When providing information about how to obtain copies of traffic accidents, exchange names of principals, etc., the “TRAFFIC ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION DRIVERS FORM” should be used.

I. **FOLLOW-UP INVESTIGATIONS:** Accident investigation follow-up is the responsibility of the on-scene investigating Officer. Follow-up investigation of fatalities, serious life threatening injuries, leaving the scene accidents, or any other type accident as determined by a supervisor, will be conducted by a Vehicular Homicide Investigator and/or Crime Scene Investigator. In such cases, the following items will be addressed as needed:

1. Collection of accident scene data;

2. Obtaining recorded formal statements from witnesses;
3. Reconstruction of accidents; and
4. Preparing formal reports to support criminal charges arising from the investigation.
5. **COMMERCIAL MOTOR VEHICLE INSPECTION:** If a commercial vehicle or a vehicle transporting hazardous materials is involved in an accident, and it is suspected of being in an unsafe or unlawful condition, or the driver reports an accident-causing defect, whenever possible a Motor Carrier Safety Inspector should be called to the scene to inspect the vehicle.

J. **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:** Traffic accident investigation personnel will use in-house technical expert assistance. Only a Vehicular Homicide Investigator, Crime Scene Investigator or supervisor may request the assistance of non-departmental experts or technicians such as:

1. Private photographers;
2. Surveyors;
3. Mechanics;
4. Traffic engineers;
5. Reconstruction experts;
6. Forensic science experts; and
7. Others such as physicians, physicists and nurses, etc.

K. **REQUIRED ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION EQUIPMENT:** Marked police vehicles will be equipped with basic equipment to enable Officers to respond to accidents or other emergencies. In addition to the emergency equipment installed on the patrol vehicle, each vehicle or officer should be equipped with the following equipment. If the equipment needs to be replaced or replenished for operational readiness, the officer will obtain the replacement from Fleet Services, or contact his or her immediate supervisor, who will facilitate the replacement.

1. Fire extinguisher
2. Emergency Response Guidebook

L. **ENFORCEMENT ACTION:** Officers are expected to take positive enforcement action whenever their traffic accident investigation or reporting activities produce probable

cause to believe that a violation of law or ordinance has occurred.

1. Specific enforcement actions arising from traffic accident investigation or reporting (e.g., physical arrest and citation for Driving Under the Influence, or other offense) will be consistent with the nature of the alleged violation and with all written directives concerning traffic law enforcement.
2. In taking positive enforcement action, the Officer must establish all elements of the violation. Elements that the Officer has not personally witnessed must be established through investigation. The investigation may include but will not be limited to:
 - a. Statements or admissions made by the alleged violator;
 - b. Statements of the witnesses; and/or
 - c. Physical evidence.

M. **TRAFFIC DIRECTION AND CONTROL:** Traffic direction and control will be determined by the investigating Officer. Temporary traffic control devices will be deployed as necessary. Additional Officers will be requested as needed. The Department of Transportation, Traffic Engineers, and/or City Street Department will be notified for additional temporary traffic control devices as needed, after supervisor notification and approval.

1. Should traffic control be needed for an extended period of time, the on-duty supervisor will arrange for sufficient relief at least every two (2) hours for officers remaining at the traffic control point.

NOTE: During periods of extreme cold or inclement weather, the on-duty supervisor will determine an appropriate relief schedule.

2. It should be noted that flashing overhead lights, flares and cones can create traffic problems and their unnecessary use will be curtailed. Once the scene has been cleared of vehicles and debris, the Officer will arrange for the prompt removal of all warning devices no longer needed.

N. **SPECIAL HAZARDS AND HAZ-MAT INCIDENTS:** An important responsibility of Officers responding to any accident scene is to keep the situation from becoming worse. This responsibility may take on added importance and complexity when an actual or potential fire hazard or hazardous material is present at the scene. Under such circumstances, Officers may be called upon to perform certain special activities, and to coordinate their activities with those of personnel from various other agencies. Priorities for action are likely to be affected by the extent and nature of the hazards present.

1. The Department will remain aware of the responsibilities, practices and procedures of other agencies that respond to and/or provide technical assistance

relating to fire hazards and hazardous materials incidents. Officers will be kept informed of these responsibilities, practices and procedures to insure the best possible coordination and delivery of services at traffic accident scenes involving such hazards.

2. **GUIDEBOOK:** The department will allocate a copy of the current issue of the U.S. Department of Transportation “EMERGENCY RESPONSE GUIDEBOOK” for hazardous material incidents for each patrol vehicle. The department will continue to provide adequate training in the use of the guidebook to each officer. Officers will participate in the training and will refer to and follow the Guidebook’s recommendations for taking emergency and other actions appropriate to specific hazardous material incidents.
3. **AWARENESS OF POTENTIAL INCIDENTS:** Officers will remain aware of the fact that ANY traffic accident involving a cargo vehicle is potentially a hazardous materials incident and will be alert for any evidence/indication of hazardous material before approaching such vehicles.
 - a. Upon arrival at the scene of an accident involving a cargo vehicle, Officers will attempt to make a preliminary identification of the cargo based on placards visible from a safe distance.
 - b. When there is any question whether spilled material at an accident scene may be hazardous, Officers will avoid contacting the material and keep other persons from contacting the material, to the extent possible. Officers will then notify a supervisor of the situation.
 - c. Officers will follow the procedures specified in the “EMERGENCY RESPONSE GUIDEBOOK” to complete the identification of hazardous materials, take appropriate emergency action, and notify relevant agencies (i.e., Huntsville Fire Department Hazardous Materials Team).
4. **FIRE HAZARDS:** Vehicles on or threatened by fire should be managed in the following manner:
 - a. If a potential for fire is present, Officers will take appropriate action to stabilize conditions by providing adequate protection to the scene, isolating the immediate area, removing persons from the vicinity of the hazard (if possible), suppressing the hazard (if possible), and summoning technical resources from the Fire Department, as necessary.
 - b. Officers will attempt to eliminate the possibility of sparks or other ignition from smoking, flares, electricity, or any other source, to the extent possible.
 - c. If a fire exists, Officers will rescue persons in the vicinity (if possible) and request fire fighting assistance as necessary.

- d. Depending upon the extent of the fire, Officers will evacuate the surrounding area and maintain isolation of the area until the fire is suppressed.
- e. Officers should carefully control the movement of vehicles within the vicinity of the fire or potential fire hazard, detouring traffic if necessary.

O. CONTROL OF PROPERTY BELONGING TO ACCIDENT VICTIMS: The Officer at the scene of an accident should ensure that property belonging to an accident victim is protected from theft and is removed to a place of safekeeping if the owner is unable to care for it.

- 1. Where practical, property found inside a vehicle at the scene of an accident should be secured with the vehicle. Items of great value, items readily accessible to theft, money or firearms WILL NOT be left with the vehicle. Such items will be properly inventoried and processed according to current procedures.
- 2. All found property for which ownership cannot be readily identified will be inventoried and processed according to current procedures.
- 3. When officers must take custody of victims' personal property, this should be done in the presence of witnesses when possible. Witnesses will be listed on the inventory report.
- 4. Whenever it is necessary to release a victim's property to another person or agency, officers will complete an "Evidence/Property Custody Document" with the person receiving the property signing for that property.

P. PREPARATION AND SUBMISSION OF TRAFFIC ACCIDENT REPORTS

- 1. Officers will submit the initial traffic accident report electronically by the end of the shift. The Records supervisor will review and forward the traffic accident report electronically to the State of Alabama. If the officer cannot complete the initial report by the end of his or her shift, a supervisor will be notified and the report will be forwarded as soon as is possible.
- 2. Officers investigating a traffic accident will complete the required traffic accident report forms as follows:
 - a. The following report forms are mandatory:
 - 1. Alabama Uniform Traffic Accident Report using the eCRASH system;

NOTE: This information will be used to provide factual data upon which to base future traffic engineering decisions or recommendations, e.g., analysis of high-incident accident locations, support of selective traffic enforcement programs, and possible traffic engineering deficiencies. When evidence of such deficiencies is found, the department will undertake, or

recommend to appropriate authorities, sight-distance and other appropriate engineering studies of the affected areas.

2. Information for Drivers Involved in Accident form.
 3. Miscellaneous Service Report will be used in lieu of the above reports under the following circumstances: incidents arising from PRIVATE PROPERTY ACCIDENTS (as previously described), DELAYED ACCIDENTS, or when a standard report is declined by drivers and not required by state laws.
 4. A paper version of the old Alabama Uniform Traffic Accident Report will be used to document reports that are to be marked for "Departmental Use Only".
- b. The following forms may also be necessary when investigating certain types of accidents:
1. Impounded Vehicle Report, if a vehicle involved in a traffic accident needs to be held for evidence (e.g., DUI case, traffic fatality, serious injury);
 2. Evidence/Property Custody Document, if property must be turned in as evidence, or turned over to another agency or person; and
 3. Alabama Uniform Incident/Offense Report if the accident involves a vehicle suspected of leaving the scene of the accident, to document the investigation of a serious-injury or fatal traffic accident, or to record other violations not enforceable by the officer.

Q. ACCIDENTS INVOLVING POLICE VEHICLES: In the event the accident involves a Police vehicle, the following will apply:

If the accident is deemed to be the employees fault, or circumstances surrounding the event cause the investigating supervisor to question whether or not the city driver could be impaired, the investigating supervisor shall cause the driver of the city vehicle to undergo DRUG and ALCOHOL testing as prescribed. During hours of operation the driver shall be transported to the City of Huntsville Employee Clinic. After normal hours of operation, the driver shall be transported to Occupational Health Group (OHG). In the event neither of these facilities are available, the driver shall be transported to Huntsville Hospital Emergency Room for testing. If the accident involves death or life-threatening injuries, the supervisor will immediately notify the Chief or his designee through Chain of Command. Either the Chief or his designee will notify ALEA Highway Patrol Division to investigate, as needed.

