

Defensive Driving

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On a cross country trip with my sister and nephew, I fell asleep and had a vivid dream about crossing the Serengeti Plain in Africa on a safari. The dry brush scraped the sides of the Jeep as we rolled along on a quest to see the big game animals. As it turned out, the dry brush was scraping against the vehicle I was riding in. I awoke to the sound of my sister screaming “STOP” from the backseat. My nephew had fallen asleep at the wheel and we were driving off-road through weeds taller than the vehicle.

In April of 2014, the operator of the Chicago Transit Authority Blue Line train “fell asleep at the wheel” injuring more than 30 people and causing millions of dollars-worth of damage. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, in 2013 there were 32,719 vehicle related fatalities. These statistics do not include the thousands of accidents causing life-altering and debilitating injuries.

Every day hundreds of Weights and Measures officials get into their vehicles, strap in, and “mosey on down the trail” in preparation for a day of inspections for their respective jurisdiction without a thought about vehicle safety. Last year, Illinois inspectors logged over 550,000 miles in inspection related travel. It wouldn’t be surprising if other jurisdictions matched or exceeded this amount of travel. For those in the weights and measures profession, an inspector’s vehicle tends to be their office, break room, and work platform all rolled into one. This is why they log far more “windshield miles” than the average motorist. As such, inspectors should remain “vehicle safety conscious” and supervisors should ensure inspectors are reminded of the responsibility they hold in their hands. Basic safety tips include:

1. Stay focused on defensive driving

- Keep 100% of your attention on driving at all times.
- Use defensive driving techniques, be aware of other drivers, and expect the unexpected.
- Give yourself time to react. Maintain a 2 second cushion between you and the car in front of you – 4 seconds if the weather is bad.

2. Practice safe driving tips

- Plan your travel time to accommodate stops for food, rest breaks and phone calls or other business.
- Pull over to eat or drink.
- Do not use cell phones or any other electronic devices while driving.
- Adjust your seat, mirrors and climate controls before putting the car in gear.

3. Prioritize car safety

- Secure cargo that may move around while the vehicle is in motion. Don’t attempt to retrieve items that fall to the floor.

- Have important items within easy reach, such as toll fees, toll cards and garage passes.

4. Slow down.

- Don't speed – it gives you less time to react and can increase the severity of an accident.

5. Think safety.

- Always wear your seat belt and drive sober and drug-free.



During my time in the Marine Corps, I was fortunate to hear a Mississippi State Trooper deliver a vehicle safety presentation. Although this was about 25 years ago and there are many parts of that presentation which I have long forgotten, he made one statement which has stuck with me:

“I have been a State Trooper for almost 30 years and I have been to thousands of accidents. Not once in those 30 years have I ever unbuckled a dead person at the scene of an accident.”

Photo retrieved from: <http://www.nationwide.com/dwd-safety-tips.jsp>