

H-185

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: May 17, 1979

Forwarded to:

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National Committee on Uniform  
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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

H-79-30

About 3:30 p.m. on August 22, 1978, an ambulance responding to an emergency call and traveling at a calculated speed of 90 to 95 mph failed to negotiate a curve on New Hampshire State Route 116 east of Littleton, New Hampshire, and rolled over. Two persons in the ambulance were killed and the driver was injured. 1/

At the time of the investigation, Safety Board investigators were informed that the Ross Ambulance Service, which owned and operated the ambulance, had no guidelines for its drivers relating to speed. Since this accident, the Ross Ambulance Service has promulgated specific guidelines relating to speed. These revised guidelines, among other things, contain the following:

Code 3: red light and siren -- move as expeditiously as possible; as fast as road, weather, traffic and patient conditions allow -- never to exceed 80 mph -- and preferably not more than 15 mph above posted speed limit.

The New Hampshire Motor Vehicle Traffic Code, Section 262A: 55 Speed exceptions states: "The speed limits shall not apply to vehicles when operated with due regard for safety...to public or private ambulances...when traveling in emergencies."

The Uniform Vehicle Code (UVC) 2/, a guide for uniform traffic laws for voluntary compliance, also provides for exemption from posted speed limits for ambulances. Section 11-106(b)3 states: "The driver of an

1/ For more detailed information, read "Highway Accident Report--Ross Ambulance Service, Ambulance Overturn, State Route 116, Littleton, New Hampshire, August 22, 1978" (NTSB--HAR-79-4).

2/ National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances, Uniform Vehicle Code Revised 1976, Section 11-106, Authorized Emergency Vehicles, p. 135.

authorized emergency vehicle, when responding to an emergency may...exceed the maximum speed limits so long as he does not endanger life or property." Highway Safety Program Standard (HSPS) No. 6, Codes and Laws, issued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recommends that the States model their traffic codes after Section 11 (Rules of the Road) of the UVC.

The New Hampshire law is typical in that it allows ambulances to exceed the posted speed limit under emergency situations, providing the "driver does not endanger life or property." The Safety Board believes that such laws, which are similar to the Basic Speed Law 3/, are much too general. Also, State laws and regulations related to emergency vehicles should be modified to include criteria to guide the drivers of emergency vehicles in making judgmental decisions regarding the speeds to select and driving procedures under adverse conditions. The Safety Board concludes that the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances, in cooperation with the American Bar Association, should review Section 11-106(b)3 of the UVC and make it more specific, including the possible imposition of a maximum speed that can be traveled above the posted speed limit under prescribed conditions.

Criteria to be considered should include: (1) The experience and training of the emergency vehicle driver; (2) the condition of the patient or the gravity of the injury as determined by a medical doctor; (3) road traffic and weather conditions; and (4) type and condition of vehicle.

In addition, the Safety Board believes that State laws should set forth a maximum speed limitation such as "No more than 10 mph above the posted speed limit under normal conditions." Such controls are in effect for a rescue service titled "MED-ACT" operated by the Johnson County, Kansas Board of Commissioners. The MED-ACT operates six ambulance/rescue units over 480 square miles and services 260,000 people. It maintains an average response time of 5.3 minutes. Its regulations provide that on emergency runs of any type, the maximum speed authorized is 10 mph over the posted speed limit with normal road, weather, and traffic conditions. If adverse weather and traffic conditions exist, necessary reductions in speeds are required.

In addition to setting criteria justifying operation of an ambulance at high speed, States should consider setting limits on the use of high speed by ambulances altogether. In the words of the Director of MED-ACT, "We do not feel the risk of 'high speed' driving is worth it to possibly save one life. Our philosophy is that we must reach the scene and the hospital, or all of our expertise, equipment, and investment is to no avail."

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3/ Ibid., Section 11-801, p. 155.

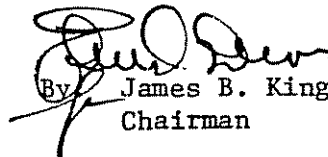
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances, in cooperation with the American Bar Association:

Consider the modification of Section 11-106(b)3 of the Uniform Vehicle Code to include the following criteria to justify an exemption from posted speed limits:

- (1) The determination by a medical authority that the gravity of the patient's situation requires emergency operation, and
- (2) the condition of the vehicle, traffic, and roadway will permit such operation, and
- (3) the environmental conditions are conducive to such operation, and
- (4) the vehicle is being operated by a certified ambulance driver, and
- (5) the ambulance speed limit will be restricted to no more than 10 mph over the posted speed limit with normal road, weather, and traffic conditions.

(Class II, Priority Action) (H-79-30)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS and HOGUE, Members, concurred in this recommendation.

  
By James B. King  
Chairman