

BY

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State Patrol

Refocusing on the Driver in Fatal Large Truck Crashes

AS AN AREA COMMANDER FOR THE IOWA STATE PATROL (ISP), ONE OF CAPTAIN KEN CLARY'S RESPONSIBILITIES INCLUDE REGULARLY REVIEWING REPORTS REGARDING SERIOUS INJURY AND FATALITY VEHICLE CRASHES. THROUGH THIS PROCESS AND DISCUSSIONS BETWEEN ISP COMMANDERS, CAPTAIN CLARY RECOGNIZED A TREND EMERGING IN THE SECOND HALF OF 2016, WHICH CONTINUED THROUGH 2018.

During this time period, report after report of fatality crashes involving large trucks emerged, specifically crashes involving commercial motor vehicles. Research on Iowa and U.S. fatality statistics made it readily apparent that this was a problematic trend. Not only were large truck fatality crashes on the rise in Iowa (16.9 percent of all Iowa fatalities in 2016, increasing to 20.9 percent in 2017), they were also on the rise across the United States.

In 2017, a total of 37,133 people lost their lives on U.S. roadways; in comparison, 17,284 people were reported by the FBI's Uniform Crime Report as murdered that same year. Annually, traffic crashes result in an enormous loss of life and are consistently a leading cause of non-health-related deaths in the United States, yet they often go unnoticed by the general public unless people are personally affected. Although fatality crashes decreased slightly in 2017 from the previous year (down 1.8 percent), fatality crashes involving large trucks markedly increased.

According to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA),

large truck crashes in the United States have increased 12 percent over the last 10 years. The largest increase during that time was a growth of 9 percent from 2016 to 2017. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), in 2017, large truck crashes resulted in 4,761 deaths on U.S. roadways, which equates to just over 12.8 percent of the total traffic fatalities for that year. There are almost 12.5 million large trucks registered in the United States, but they make up only approximately 9 percent of vehicles on the roadway (by vehicle miles traveled).

Many officers experience a hesitance to stop large trucks, primarily due to the officers' lack of training and experience with the required paperwork associated with large trucks. As a former Motor Carrier Safety Assistance Program (MCSAP)-trained trooper, Captain Clary can attest that it can be difficult to determine what constitutes a commercial motor vehicle. There are a multitude of rules and regulations governing the use of commercial motor vehicles, which may add to the confusion. However, it does not take any special

training above that of a normal law enforcement officer to make a simple traffic stop on a large truck violating traffic laws. Officers should take action regarding the simple violations that lead to many large truck crashes, which can cause serious injury or death to truck occupants or other roadway users.

Across the United States, more than 5.16 million inspections were completed on large trucks and their drivers in 2017. Of those inspections, just over 57 percent were inspections on the driver, while the remaining inspections were on equipment (approximately 39 percent) and hazardous materials (3.6 percent). In comparison, only 5 percent of the time were "vehicle-related factors" coded as the cause of the fatal crashes involving large trucks. Although large trucks are found to be at fault in less than half of all fatality crashes they are involved in, when at fault, the driver of the truck is coded as the causal factor 32 percent of the time. According to the FMCSA, "Speeding of Any Kind" was the most frequent driver-related factor for large truck drivers, while "Distraction/Inattention" was the second most common. The FMCSA also noted 23 percent of the large trucks in fatal crashes had critical pre-crash events of their own movement or loss of control, which could be an indication of fatigue or

driving over the allotted hours allowed. Impaired large truck drivers were also among the top 10 causal factors resulting in fatality crashes. Fatalities involving alcohol-impaired drivers of any vehicle type was the single largest increasing category of crash causes, with an increase of over 61 percent. All of the previously mentioned categories involve offenses that are easily enforceable without having to complete an inspection of any kind.

Due to the ever-increasing fatality crash rates involving large trucks, along with Iowa having a much higher rate in that category (20.9 percent) when compared to the national average (12.8 percent), the ISP took three steps to try to curb that trend.

First, the ISP gave additional training to all of their uniformed officers regarding traffic stops involving large trucks. Second, the ISP added troopers to their MCSAP in order to increase the number of driver inspections (since drivers are the primary single contributing factor for large truck crashes). Finally, the Iowa Department of Public Safety partnered with the University of Iowa and NHTSA to host the first-of-its-kind National Drowsy Driving Summit, which was intended to bring training and awareness to the dangers associated with driving while drowsy or sleep impaired. With these initiatives,

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along with the great work of the Iowa Department of Transportation enforcement officers, Iowa ranked third among U.S. states in the rate of drivers placed out-of-service in 2016 (12.08 percent).

The U.S. Department of Transportation and NHTSA compiled fatal motor vehicle crash data and have determined that 94 percent of fatal crashes could have been avoided by simply changing human behavior.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there are roughly 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States, with more than 750,000 full-time sworn officers. Imagine what could be done if the majority of those officers took a proactive approach in attempting to drive down the number of vehicle crashes and the associated death toll. The first step to changing the behavior of large truck operators is making traffic stops when they are warranted by getting past the trepidation associated with the unknown and treating large trucks like any other vehicle. In order to change the problematic trends identified, officers must be willing to take on the challenge.

Captain Clary urges all law enforcement who are charged with traffic safety to take the initiative and interact with large truck drivers as needed and when appropriate for normal traffic violations. As identified previously, speeding; distracted driving; and impaired drivers (from alcohol, drugs, or sleep deprivation) make up a large portion of the causation of large truck serious injury and fatality crashes. With a concerted effort by law enforcement to take proactive traffic enforcement steps to curb this rising trend, they can make a difference, one driver at a time. ♡

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