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## Working Together

### Tow Operators and First Responders

By Dave Lewis

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), nearly six million vehicle crashes occur annually on the nation's roadways. Additionally, according to the American Automobile

In a training scenario of a school bus crashed on top of a car, Milewski Towing & Recovery Service provided several tow vehicles to demonstrate what's needed to extricate trapped victims.

Association (AAA), nearly 30 million calls for roadside assistance occur each year. These numbers demonstrate that thousands of first responders and tow operators are on the scene of traffic incidents 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year.

Handling a roadway incident presents many risks. Unfortunately, motorists are often unaware of these dangers, and are more concerned about getting to where they are going than looking out for the safety of first responders and tow operators.

Although not all state authorities agree on the precise definition of first responders, in actual practice they

## Locating Courses

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) sponsors the National TIM Responder Training Course. Individuals have the option to attend a four-hour, in-person course or complete an online, self-paced course. The in-person training is offered across all states using a network of training instructors.

- Access the list of training coordinators in each state at [https://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/tim/training/tim\\_trng\\_state\\_poc\\_list\\_040924\\_508.pdf](https://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/tim/training/tim_trng_state_poc_list_040924_508.pdf)
- Access the online training course at [https://www.nhi.fhwa.dot.gov/course-search?tab=0&key=133126A&sf=0&course\\_no=133126A](https://www.nhi.fhwa.dot.gov/course-search?tab=0&key=133126A&sf=0&course_no=133126A)
- Responder Safety Learning Network - The

Emergency Responder Safety Institute of the Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firefighters Association developed the Responder Safety Learning Network as part of its mission to improve the safety of the nation's emergency responders. The Learning Network includes a collection of 49 modules that can be completed online as your schedule allows. The Learning Network is provided free of charge to all first responders.

- Access the Learning Network at <https://learning.respondersafety.com/>
- Recommended modules include "Fire Service Collaboration with Towing & Recovery Operations" and "Starting and Sustaining a TIM Committee"

include not only personnel from fire/EMS, law enforcement, but also towing and recovery, service patrols, and others.

Success at a roadway incident is best achieved when towing and recovery operators are recognized as first responders or emergency responders. Their job is much more than simply "clearing scenes" or "removing disabled vehicles." They are integral to the safe and efficient management of traffic incidents (note sidebar on "Cooperation is Key").

Without their specialized skills, abilities, and equipment, crash scenes and disabled vehicles would remain hazards, impeding traffic flow and creating further safety risks. They operate in inherently dangerous environments, often under high pressure and time constraints. Their work directly impacts public safety and the efficient restoration of roadways.

### CLOSE COOPERATION

Operating safely on roadway incidents requires all first responders to work closely together to complete the necessary tasks safely and efficiently to facilitate the quick return of the flow of

traffic to normal. These tasks are completed by working together under the concept of Traffic Incident Management (TIM).

Traffic Incident Management refers to the systematic, coordinated process of detecting, responding to, and clearing traffic incidents efficiently and safely. It involves multiple stakeholders, including first responders (police, fire, EMS), towing & recovery operators, transportation agencies, and others.

Through a national consensus-building process, the National Traffic Incident Management Consortium (NTIMC) brought together the major national organizations representing traffic incident responders and developed the National Unified Goal (NUG) for Traffic Incident Management (TIM).

The NUG is a national policy aimed at improving the management of traffic incidents on U.S. roadways. It focuses on three key objectives:

- Ensuring the safety of emergency responders working at traffic incident scenes.
- Reducing the time needed to clear incidents to minimize traffic disruptions and

secondary accidents.

- Enhancing communication and coordination among all responders involved in traffic incidents.

Implementing the goals of the NUG requires that each first responder agency work towards the strategies defined by the NTIMC. Key strategies include recommended practices for multidisciplinary TIM operations and communications; multidisciplinary TIM training; goals for performance and progress; promotion of beneficial technologies; and partnerships to promote driver awareness. These strategies can be easily implemented through the following programs:

- TIM Partnerships and Programs. Traffic Incident Management partners at the national, state, regional, and local levels should work together to promote, develop, and sustain effective Traffic Incident Management Programs.
- The importance of local, regional, and state TIM committees—TIM committees bring together ►





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stakeholders from various agencies and organizations that collaborate to improve the management of traffic incidents. TIM committees operate at local, regional, or state levels and play a crucial role in ensuring efficient and safe traffic incident management.

- The purpose of a TIM committee is to enhance coordination and communication among responders. In addition, develop and implement standard operating procedures for incident management. TIM provides training and cross-training opportunities for responders, along with conducting after-action reviews to improve future responses. The goal is to promote safety for both responders and the public.

## JOINING SERVICES

TIM responders should also receive multidisciplinary National Incident Management System (NIMS training). Training together has several benefits.

Joint training helps establish clear communication protocols and ensures that everyone understands their roles during an emergency. This minimizes confusion and

speeds up operations.

Obviously, emergency scenes, especially on busy highways, can be dangerous. Training together equips towing & recovery operators with knowledge about first responders' procedures and safety measures, reducing risks for everyone involved.

Quick and efficient removal of vehicles and debris reduces traffic congestion and the likelihood of secondary accidents. Collaborative training helps both towing & recovery operators, and first responders work more seamlessly to achieve this.

First responders and towing & recovery operators can share expertise and techniques during training, leading to better overall performance during real incidents. Regular training fosters strong working relationships and mutual respect, which are invaluable in high-stress situations.


## PRACTICAL PROGRAMS

Here are a couple of examples of successful training programs that foster collaboration between towing & recovery operators and other first responders:

- National Traffic Incident Management (TIM) Responder

**Training Program:** This program is designed to improve responder safety, ensure quick clearance of incidents, and promote effective communication among all parties involved, including tow operators. It provides multi-disciplinary training to enhance coordination during highway incidents. TIM training can be completed as an in-person class or online through the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Responder Safety Learning Network, and other sources across the country (note sidebar).

- **Fire Service Collaboration with Towing & Recovery Operations:** This program emphasizes joint training between fire departments and towing & recovery operators. Quite often, fire departments will contact local towing & recovery operators to gain access to junked vehicles to use in training. Why not make this training a joint exercise to learn from each other? The training can cover activities such as vehicle rescue techniques, handling new vehicle technologies (like electric or hybrid vehicles), and large vehicle rescue scenarios. The goal is to ensure safe and efficient roadway clearance.

These programs highlight the importance of continuous learning and collaboration to improve safety and efficiency at incident scenes. As part of the first responder community, towing & recovery operators play a crucial role in managing emergency scenes, particularly on roadways, and collaboration with first responders like police officers, firefighters, and paramedics is vital for ensuring safety and efficiency. By working together, towing & recovery operators and other first responders can save lives, protect public safety, and keep traffic moving smoothly. It's a partnership that makes a big difference. 

## Cooperation is Key

Mike Milewski is a volunteer firefighter with the Jefferson Township Volunteer Fire Company, and also the owner of Milewski Towing & Recovery Service in Scranton, PA. Recognizing the need to bring his two specialty skills together, Mike often provides the fire company with junked vehicles to use for rescue training and encourages his tow operators to participate in the training. By training together, the two organizations better understand each other's needs at a crash scene and work more efficiently together.

Mike also encouraged both organizations to challenge themselves during training for the more difficult incidents. Rather than just having two automobiles involved in a crash scenario, what if one of the vehicles is a much heavier vehicle? Or what if one of the vehicles was on top of another, and additional towing resources are needed to assist in the rescue operations to stabilize or remove one of the vehicles from the other?

Training as Mike had visualized was conducted on October 25, 2022. The Jefferson Township Volunteer Fire Company hosted a rescue training drill and invited several other neighboring departments to participate. Milewski Towing & Recovery Service provided several towing vehicles and arranged the use of a school bus to complete the scenario. The situation called for the school bus crashing on top of an automobile, and the resources of the tow vehicle were needed to extricate the trapped victims.

This training would prove to be invaluable at an actual incident scene that occurred on March 16, 2025. At 6:20 p.m. that day, the Jefferson Township Volunteer Fire Company was dispatched for a reported crash involving a school bus and a tractor-trailer. Units arriving on the scene found a school bus positioned with its front end on top of the trailer, and on top of a load of pipes, creating an unsteady environment. There were 20 occupants on the bus, and the driver was trapped due to damage to the front end of the bus.

Jefferson Township Volunteer Fire Company called for additional rescue resources and a heavy towing vehicle to assist in the rescue operations. During the operations, the heavy tow vehicle was necessary to stabilize the school bus so that the victims could be removed and extrication of the driver completed safely. Fortunately, all injuries were minor and all victims have recovered.

Shortly after the incident, the Jefferson Volunteer Fire Company, along with the other responding fire and EMS agencies, and the Milewski Towing & Recovery Service personnel, met to conduct a post-incident (PIA) analysis of the crash scene operations. They also involved the 911 dispatch partners, who also had a vital role in communications during the event. The PIA examined every stage of the incident, from dispatch to termination, and helped identify successes, areas for improvement, and opportunities to enhance coordination. Opportunities like this help refine the incident operations and strengthen the relationships between responding agencies. By working together, the public is better served and protected.

By training together, the fire/rescue personnel and the towing & recovery personnel understood the challenges of a complicated crash scene and were able to smoothly work together just as they had been trained. The Jefferson Township Volunteer Fire Company and Milewski Towing and Recovery Services skillfully demonstrated how interdisciplinary collaboration and cooperation can lead to success in these types of incidents.