



Leadership

Steve White: Calling for Heavy Wreckers

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BY STEVE WHITE

Heavy wreckers can play a significant role in the positive outcome of a rescue operation. A positive outcome includes victim survivability and rescuer safety. The fire service has come a long way in developing a positive working relationship with the towing and recovery industry.

Developing that relationship includes preincident operational training, which allows the fire department (or rescue agency) and the towing company, to learn each other's capability, needs, and terminology.

It is equally important that a preincident agreement or memorandum of understanding (MOU) be established. This allows billing and potential contractual conflicts to be addressed. This becomes key, as law enforcement commonly manages wrecker notifications to accident scenes. Most towing and recovery companies are easy to work with and willing to help, but addressing administrative issues before the incident allows

for relationships with towing companies and law enforcement to remain strong post-incident.

Calling for the Heavy Wrecker

With a few exceptions, most fire departments do not own or staff their own heavy wreckers (although a few do). This means a system for automatic response or calling from the field should be in place. Let's look at each of these.

Automatic Response

This refers to an instance when the 911 center has to meet specific criteria for an emergency where a heavy wrecker is needed and is immediately called for. Since heavy wreckers are considered a private sector resource, the 911 center must call the heavy wrecker dispatcher to get that resource on the road.

Calling from the Field

This is the most common system for getting a heavy wrecker to the scene. Based on information obtained en route or from on-scene size-up, a heavy wrecker is requested. It's up to each department to determine the level of empowerment its personnel have relative to requesting a heavy wrecker—some departments may allow only personnel with the ranks of captain and above to call for the wrecker; others may authorize the first arriving officer to call for it.

Calling for the Right Wrecker (or Wreckers)

The last thing you want to happen is to call for a heavy wrecker to lift a large truck off a passenger vehicle and have a rollback (flatbed) wrecker show up. The fire service has no specific “typing” of heavy wreckers; however, the wrecker industry does. Fire service interaction with the wrecker industry is considered a low-frequency event, thus retaining wrecker industry category knowledge may be a challenge.

When calling from the field, we must understand that this request travels from the field to the 911 dispatcher center and then to the wrecker dispatcher or on-call wrecker driver.

With this many communication touches, there is a chance that some information may be

lost or miscommunicated. This reinforces the importance to train with wrecker companies before the incident, so proper terminology is covered and understood.

One way to help ensure that the proper wrecker is requested is for the field unit to paint a good picture of what is needed—for example, “I need a heavy wrecker to lift a fully loaded tri-axle dump off a passenger car with people trapped” can easily be conveyed from the field to the wrecker driver. This gives the wrecker driver an idea of the weight of the truck and the urgency of people trapped. The wrecker driver may also bring other resources, including an additional heavy wrecker or support vehicles that carry additional equipment such as lifting bags. It may also be beneficial for the field unit to provide specific information on how the wrecker can best access the scene. For example, if a limited-access highway has been safely shut down by law enforcement, the wrecker may be able to travel against the normal flow of traffic to access the scene faster.

When possible, having the on-scene field unit (incident commander) communicate with the wrecker driver directly by cell phone or radio can be helpful. This allows the wrecker driver to ask specific questions so he can determine what other resources will be needed and how to best access the scene.

Each response agency has various dynamics within its jurisdiction that can impact the notification and response of heavy wreckers to an emergency scene. That is the reason preincident training involving emergency response agencies and wrecker companies is critical.

BIO

Steve White is a 27-year veteran of the Fisher (IN) Fire Department, where he is a battalion chief. He is a senior instructor with Advanced Rescue Solutions. He has been published in *Fire Engineering*, has written for and presented podcasts on fireengineering.com, and has posted videos on extrication on Fire Engineering’s “Training Minutes.” He was the lead instructor for the FDIC Heavy Truck Extrication H.O.T. program in 2007 and 2008 and has been a part of the program’s cadre since 2011. As an IFSAC-accredited instructor II and III, he has taught rescue classes nationally for

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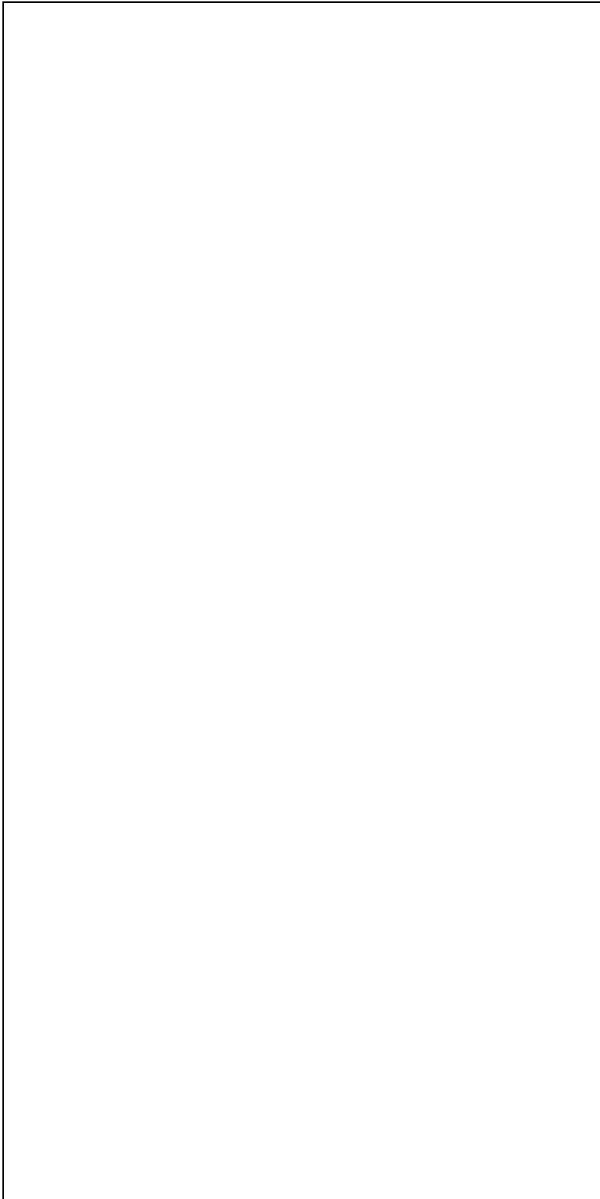
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