



FIRE & EMS BULLETIN



DRIVERS – MINIMUM AGE FOR FIRE APPARATUS & AMBULANCE DRIVERS

Ambulance and fire apparatus crashes are the second leading cause of injuries for emergency responders. Improper driver decisions and behaviors play a major role in many of these incidents. Properly selecting and training drivers can have a significant impact on the lives of the crews, the reputation of the agency, and the bottom line of the municipality or district.

While establishing a minimum age is a convenient manner to begin training as an emergency vehicle operator, we believe a minimum level of experience is a better measure of when a member is ready to begin driver training. It takes experience to learn to position a fire pumper or ladder truck at a fire, or an ambulance at an EMS call. Consider the many factors that must be evaluated in seconds as a pumper or ladder truck approaches a bread-and-butter structure fire:

- Hydrant location or tanker supply and laying hose.
- Overhead obstructions.
- Curb, street, and driveway conditions.
- Best access to the structure.
- Room for later arriving vehicles, and many more.

The same types of considerations affect arriving ambulances. Where will paramedics be positioned? Is there an exit route as later arriving units assemble? Traffic hazards? Smoke hazards? And more...

Experience also provides lessons to driver candidates on human tendencies such as 'adrenaline rush', 'wake-effect', and 'siren hypnosis'. Witnessing these effects in ourselves and others, and learning to recognize and control them, is a critical component in the maturing process of driver candidates.

For these reasons, the Safety Director's office strongly supports driver candidates who have a minimum of three years of driving experience and three years of EMS/firefighting experience. We also recommend at least one year of experience with the fire or EMS agency to become familiar with the specifics of the local roads and operations. We recommend the time frames based on the typical response frequency of a New Jersey fire department or EMS squad. For extremely active agencies, the experience may be achieved sooner.

Once the driver candidate has completed the required experience, knowledge and skills training begins. The MSI provides model required knowledge and demonstrated skill training forms in the Apparatus Driver Qualification & Training model policy on [MSI Fire & EMS](#).

Evaluation follows education and training. Education, skills training, and evaluation should be thought of as separate functions. Trainers must be watchful of the candidate's skill, demeanor, and knowledge of driving large vehicles under extremely stressful conditions. Evaluations should include non-emergency driving, such as returning to quarters or to training sites as part of the process. This takes time.

Fire and EMS agencies must ensure driver candidates are carefully evaluated for driving skills, operational knowledge, and behind-the-wheel behaviors for emotional maturity. The evaluation of drivers should be a detailed and well-documented process.

Lastly, frequent coaching is a proven strategy to improve the skills, decision-making, and behaviors of drivers. At least one call each shift should be informally debriefed by the crew officer and the driver. Officers are reminded that reinforcing desirable behaviors is very effective in improving performance.