

OPERATIONS ADVISORY

TO: Contra Costa County Non-Emergency Ambulance Providers

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Contra Costa County Emergency Medical Services

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SUBJECT: Code 3 Ambulance Operations

California Vehicle Code section 21055 exempts an authorized emergency vehicle (ambulance) from certain traffic laws when operated in response to an emergency call or is operated from one place to another as rendered desirable or necessary by reason of an emergency call, and the driver of the vehicle sounds a siren as may be reasonably necessary. The vehicle must also display a lighted red lamp visible from the front as a warning to other driver and pedestrians. This is commonly referred to as "Code 3" driving.

Code 3 ambulance operations are inherently dangerous. Ambulances involved in fatal crashes are twice as likely to be operating Code 3.¹ On average, a Code 3 response in a small city saves only 43.5 seconds.²

The decision to respond Code 3 or to transport a patient Code 3 to a hospital shall not be the decision of the physician or medical professional at the sending or receiving facility; however, the opinion and recommendation of the physician or other medical professional at the sending or receiving facility regarding the patient's acuity and medical condition should be considered in evaluating whether a Code 3 response or transport is appropriate and safe. In other words, the driver of an ambulance may not exercise the *privilege* to operate Code 3 merely because a physician or medical professional at the sending or receiving facility requests or demands it.

The determination of whether an ambulance shall be operated Code 3 in response to an emergency call or while transporting a patient to or from a hospital is the sole discretion of the ambulance driver. The ambulance driver should consider whether there are

¹ Pirralo: "Characteristics of fatal ambulance crashes during emergency and non-emergency operations," *EVS Monitor*, July/August 1994.

² Hunt RC, et al: "Is ambulance transport time with lights and sirens faster than without?" *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 25(4):507-11, April 1995.



reasonable grounds to believe that there is an emergency, whether or not Code 3 operation is necessary and appropriate in responding to or transporting from the emergency, and whether traffic and weather conditions allow for the ambulance to be operated Code 3 in due regard for the safety of pedestrians or persons using the highway. Mere operation of ambulance in a Code 3 configuration does not protect the driver from liability for the arbitrary exercise of the privilege to drive Code 3. In determining whether there is a true emergency, the ambulance driver should consider whether there is a high probability of death or serious injury if the patient is not transported Code 3.

Non-emergency ambulance providers who operate an ambulance Code 3 in response to an emergency call or while transporting a patient to a receiving facility in Contra Costa County must notify the EMS Agency on an EMS Event Report form prior to the end of their shift.

The EMS Event Report form is located at <http://cchealth.org/ems/event-reporting/>.

