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New law says Whoa! when passing emergency vehicles

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Thursday, March 26, 2009

A new state law could catch many motorists by surprise.

The statute, which took effect March 22, requires drivers to slow down and if possible move into the next lane as they approach a stationary emergency or maintenance vehicle with its lights flashing.

Offenders are subject to a fine of up to $100, and the offense would go against a motorist's driving record as a moving violation.

There are no additional consequences for repeat offenders.

The law applies to all roads in the state, local as well as highway.

According to State Police Sgt. David Mahan, a driver's slowed-down speed would depend on the posted speed limit and road conditions, but would be a "substantial decrease."

The law is intended to help protect police, firefighters, paramedics, tow-truck drivers and all roadside emergency and maintenance workers.

On Feb. 19, a state police trooper was hurt on Interstate Route 91 in Deerfield while investigating an accident. Trooper Terrence Halbach was injured when a passing car went out of control and struck his cruiser.

Hadley Police Chief Dennis Hukowicz said he was a proponent of implementing the new rules.

Besides the danger from motorists who drive by stationary emergency vehicles at high speeds, "people tend to look at the blue lights, too, and what's going on around at the scene instead of paying attention to where their vehicle is headed," said Hukowicz.

Violators could be ticketed in a number of ways, he said. Their license plate number might be noted and the fine assessed by mail; they could also be signaled to pull over by the officer in the stationary vehicle or be stopped by another, nearby officer who is aware of the offense.

When asked whether drivers would be given a break if they claim to be unaware of the law in its early days, Mahan said that would depend on the officer, but he expects it to be "enforced fairly strictly."

Massachusetts is the 44th state in the nation to adopt such a law.

According to the Merit Rating Board, in 2008 there were nearly 2,000 violations of the Chapter 89 law that deals with obstructing emergency vehicles, including failure to yield and following too closely, which are related to the new law, said Mahan.

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