

To the Senate Transportation Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to come and speak about this very important potential piece of legislation. I want to personally thank Sen. Perchlik for introducing this extremely important bill for the committee's consideration. When I learned of this bill being introduced, I called Sen. Perchlik to congratulate him on introducing such a common-sense bill. He beat me to the punch, and I am glad that this committee is taking it up.

In May of 2005, an ambitious Rutland High School Senior joined the Rutland Town Fire Department. Here is where my dedication to public service and spirit for volunteerism was first born. One of the earliest lessons I learned was from one of our assistant chiefs at the time. I'll never forget him asking me, "what's the quickest way to get killed as a volunteer firefighter?" I quickly answered by saying it was obviously being burned in a fire. He unequivocally told me that I was wrong. The answer to his question was simple.... The fastest way to die as a volunteer firefighter was at the scene of a motor vehicle accident by a distracted driver. This early lesson always stayed with me and you learned to grow a set of eyes in the back of your head when you were at a car accident.

This simple, yet meaningful bill that sits in your committee is a way to save lives, period. Each year for the last several decades, anywhere from 5-20 firefighters in the United States have lost their lives at the scene of a motor vehicle accident. In 2019, that number equaled 8% of all US firefighter deaths. On the National Fire Protection Agency's website, better known as the NFPA, we can read the following...

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These are just a few examples of the tragic deaths that occur all too often by distracted drivers. Car accidents to the general public are something that they don't see every day. Naturally, curiosity gets the best of the driver and their attention to driving becomes distracted. With smart phones, often times drivers have the nerve to film the emergency scene rather than paying attention to the road. This makes for a dangerous situation for our firefighters and EMS personnel.

Data shows that blue lights are easier to see at night, in the snow, and on a foggy day. Seeing a blue light causes an instantaneous sensation within a driver to hit the brakes, as we are all trained that blue equals police. Speeds from motorists at auto accidents are always slower when a police officer is on scene. Unfortunately, there isn't always a law enforcement officer readily available to respond to the crash alongside with the fire apparatus.

Using Rutland Town as an example, there were 41 motor vehicle accidents in 2020. This equaled 24% of their total call volume. Route 4 headed east to west, and Route 7 headed north to south run right through this highly traveled community. Red lights, reflective safety vests, and cones are simply not enough to keep our brave men and women safe. I can't tell you how many cones were destroyed on an annual basis from distracted motorists. Thank God these cones weren't people.

As I conclude my testimony, I would offer a few final thoughts.

First, I would not support individual volunteers using blue lights in their own vehicles. This is asking for trouble. Having red lights and sirens in the personal vehicles of our volunteers is a great responsibility already.

Secondly, do we know with certainty that the deaths that I referenced earlier would have been avoided if the fire apparatus had a blue light flashing? Of course not. But how do we know that it wouldn't have prevented even one of those deaths? If it had, then putting a blue light on a fire truck is well worth it.

Thirdly, it's no secret that many fire departments have already made the bold decision to include a blue light in their lighting packages on the rear of their fire trucks. This is also true when you look at many police agencies who have made the decision to run a red light along with their blues. This bill would show that we stand with our first responders and hear their concerns.

Finally, when I ran for the senate, I wanted to be able to make a real, tangible difference for our state. Here is a way that we can all do better for Vermonters. We can potentially save the lives of our emergency personnel who risk their lives for us every time the pager goes off. All we are talking about here is a simple blue light on the rear of a fire truck. This simple step in the right direction will cost peanuts and could be the reason a mom or dad gets another opportunity to go home and tuck their kids in at night.

Thank you for the committee's time and I truly hope that we can send this bill to the entire senate for the vote that it deserves.