

February 17, 2021

Senate Bill S-40

Committee members

Good morning, and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify regarding this very important topic.

My name is Ken Morton. I am a 49 year member of the Fire Service – starting at Norwich University in 1972, and retiring as Chief in Williston this past September. Prior to my retirement, I was President of the Vermont Career Fire Chiefs Association, and Chair of the Vermont Coalition of Fire and EMS Services.

During my 30 years as Fire Chief, both at Norwich and in Williston, I witnessed many, many near misses, heard about near misses from my Officers, and read about crashes involving Fire Apparatus and Ambulances. From my own experience at vehicle accidents on roadways, it was clear and obvious how much oncoming traffic slowed down once there was a blue light on the accident scene. This led to a practice of, in some instances, shutting down an entire road (and in a couple of instances an Interstate Highway) in the interest of safety for my troops while I was in Command. Ten years ago, I first proposed modifying the light permitting process to allow for Fire and EMS to have one (1) blue light on the rear of each Apparatus, and Law Enforcement to utilize whatever combination of colors they deemed necessary to protect themselves.

The rationale behind this, and previous bills before the Senate and the House, is simple - Visibility, which ultimately leads to Emergency Responder safety. As there will be other testimony, I will not repeat what is included in the testimony provided by Chief Dean Gilmore. Instead, I have listed some facts which dispel inaccurate claims of what this legislation will allow, and will speak to some of the scientific data which supports the use of blue lenses.

First, to set the record straight...

This Bill allows for the placement of one (1) flashing blue lens on the rear of an agency owned vehicle. No rotating blue lights, and no blue lights on the side or front of a vehicle. Why? The intent of the Bill is not to represent a Fire Truck or Ambulance as a Law Enforcement vehicle, but rather to be better seen as a motorist is approaching from the rear - especially at high speed, and especially at night.

This Bill applies to agency owned vehicles only.

This Bill is NOT intended to cause a Firefighter, EMT, State Hazmat Team member to represent as a Police Officer.

This Bill does NOT allow for use by agency personnel on their personal vehicles.

This Bill does NOT mandate that an agency use a blue light on the rear – it simply affords an agency the opportunity to place a blue light on the rear if desired. Therefore, there will not be any significant cost per agency – just the cost of one blue lens per vehicle.

Current practice...

Fire and EMS agencies from Brattleboro to Alburgh are currently using a blue light on their Fire Apparatus and Ambulances.

Many Law Enforcement agencies across the State of Vermont, including local Police Departments and Sheriffs, are using red lights.

Throughout New England, New York, New Jersey, and other Emergency Service Agencies across the country, a combination of red and blue lights for Law Enforcement, Fire and EMS is being used. As motorists travel across state lines with regularity, there will not be confusion – multi-colored lenses are the norm.

Data supporting why this makes sense....

Visibility. Studies across the country have addressed lens color differences - day versus night, red versus blue, and all have shown that Blue is the most recognizable color. I have yet to find a study which concludes that red is a preferred color. Findings from these studies...

Red is more visible during the day, and blue more visible at night. (In Florida, the Highway Patrol actually has their lights set up to flash predominantly red during daytime hours and blue during evening hours.)

The last color affected by varying levels of colorblindness is blue and the first affected is red.

Red is more visible in strong daylight.

Blue has a shorter wavelength in the color spectrum. It gives the perception of being much closer, and moving toward you. Red has a longer wavelength, and gives the perception of being farther away, and moving away from you. The result is that blue lights allow for an earlier response by oncoming motorists, and results in a greater cushion of safety.

Red lights have a “moth effect” – drawing you in. Red also can be a stop light, a brake light, a turn signal, or a stop sign.

Last, the human factor. Blue lights mean authority. They could be a Law Enforcement vehicle. You could get a ticket. A blue light gets peoples’ attention faster, they pay more attention, and they are more apt to slow down.

In closing, I quote a Chief of Police from Ohio. “Think about it. If you are driving down the road at night, what do you see? Red lights. They are stop signs, traffic lights, and brake lights. Blue lights are more visible, and, stand out to you”.

At the end of the process, my interest is to keep ALL emergency responders as safe as possible, while at the same time not infringing on the role of Law Enforcement. I feel legislation which supports science and what is already being practiced, supports that interest.

Thank you in advance for your support.

Kenneth N. Morton, Jr.
Fire Chief (retired)
Williston Fire Department