



Reporting for duty

Track down all the incident reports, videos and maybe even a witness to better understand what happened



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The lawyer investigating the incident tried to piece it together. One bicyclist. One driver. A police report lacking detail (and witnesses). A classic “he said, he said.” As the lawyer sat there, the mail arrived. In it, an envelope with a disk and a computer-assisted dispatch log. Bingo! The dispatcher noted a caller, not included in the police report, who said she saw the incident.

The records officer, however, had redacted the name and number. The lawyer put the disk in the computer. The 911 audio started playing. There, on the audio, that same witness gave her name and cell phone number. The hunt was on...

Reports, reports, reports

There’s a surprising number of records generated by an incident. Since we weren’t there, getting these records helps us get a better understanding of the event. So we put out our feelers, hoping to find that key evidence that helps us solve the case.

Police, Sheriffs, and CHP reports

The traffic collision report is just one piece generated by law enforcement. Most departments now take photos. Those typically require a separate request (and fee). Want to know if photos were taken? Most agencies use the CHP traffic collision report form to comply with statewide incident reporting (the major source for SWITRS data, for those looking at roadway design cases). If the box in the upper right is checked yes for photos, order them. If it is not checked and photos are critical, consider contacting the officers. Sometimes they will use a personal phone to take pictures and sometimes they’ll share the information. Don’t forget that the CHP also has MAIT teams that generate a separate (super detailed) report for major incidents.

Emergency dispatch

Dispatchers generate useful information. The computer-assisted dispatch log contains time-stamped entries made by the dispatchers. This includes the initial call, codes for all the agencies and responding units, and sometimes quotes from callers. When trying to decipher one, search for police dispatcher codes. It helps translate items like “1179” into “accident – ambulance sent.” Dispatch also typically records the 911 calls and the radio traffic regarding an incident. These recordings can contain occasional gold: For example, an admissible statement of a party opponent. “The sun was in my eyes and I just mowed down a cyclist.” Some dispatchers also maintain TPS reports as well, but ordering these requires the new cover

sheets. (Not obscure, it’s just been 17 years since *Office Space* was released. Look it up, youngsters).

Fire departments

Once dispatch is aware that someone may be injured, the fire department is typically activated. The most common response is an engine company, with a trained paramedic and other personnel. The paramedic provides medical care. The others cut the person out of the car, take notes for the paramedic, or help secure the scene. The paramedic packages the patient for transport by a separate (often private) ambulance company. The paramedic then writes a patient care report.

Typically, there’s a separate fire department report for the incident – for example the vehicle extrication. This is often referred to as the Captain’s report. Make sure to ask how many reports are generated when contacting the records department.

Ambulances

Fire departments respond to incidents but a vast majority of them in the Bay Area steer clear of transporting from incident location to emergency room. Most municipalities contract with a private company like AMR or King Ambulance for transportation. The transport company generates a separate report (and a big bill).

Private security and nearby structures

Did the incident happen on an entity’s premises or near some form of private security? They probably did reports too. And with the proliferation of security cameras, there’s a good chance the incident was caught on video. These get recorded over quickly, though, so locating the video right away is important.

Body cameras

These are a hot topic in law enforcement. It is worth finding out if the agency uses them or has pilot projects. Cameras aren’t limited to law enforcement, either. Fire departments and private ambulance companies are sometimes letting folks use them to record calls for training purposes. It does not hurt to ask.

Social media

There may be photos or video from the event on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram posted by responding agencies. Go through their feeds to check. Agencies have joined the social media world, reminding people that they exist, do good, and are therefore worth funding. Images can also be geotagged and searched by date and location. Sometimes an incident is recorded by a random passerby – we located video of a collision on Instagram this way.



Outro

Back to our lawyer and the call to the neutral witness. She described what she saw. The driver blew through a red light and struck the cyclist. A statement followed. Thanks to some detailed investigation, a tricky liability case soon became much better for the cyclist.

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