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Is a license enough for ambulance drivers?

Extent of EMT training questioned by widower

By **DAVID DOEGE**

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While sorting out his wife's death in the collision of her car and an ambulance, Gregg Theune came across a single sentence he can't forget and wants to change.

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"The ambulance shall be driven by an individual with a valid driver's license."

In a chapter of the Wisconsin Administrative Code, between the sections governing all-terrain vehicles and amusement rides, are the laws

Cindy Theune

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concerning ambulance service in the state. The part covering drivers vexes Theune because he thinks the single sentence is too simple.

"I was shocked to learn that no specialized training or certification is required to drive an ambulance," Theune explained. "Only a valid driver's license is needed.

"It's no different than someone who delivers

pizzas."

The prosecutor who reviewed the circumstances of the collision and recommended that the ambulance driver be ticketed for driving too fast for conditions and failure to obey traffic signals agrees with Theune.

"When you're driving any kind of emergency vehicle, you should have extra training," Waukesha County District Attorney Paul Bucher said. "I think it should be mandated.

"Most people are surprised to hear that it's not. They think these people have special skills and training."

The leader of an organization for ambulance services in the state disagrees with Bucher and Theune.

"The number of crashes involving ambulances that we have in the state is extremely low," said Don Hunjadi, executive director of the Wisconsin EMS Association. "In a typical year, we have 10 to 15 accidents, and it usually is not the ambulance driver that is at fault."

According to Hunjadi, in the five-year period from 1999 through 2003, the state Department of Transportation recorded one crash involving a fatality, 17 involving injuries and 40 involving property damage.

On average, he said, 490,000 ambulance runs occur each year in the state.




Photo/Family


Quotable


“ Its no different than someone who delivers pizzas. ”

- Gregg Theune, crash victims husband, on training for ambulance drivers

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"The amount of training for EMTs (emergency medical technicians) continues to increase all the time," Hunjadi said, noting that 14,000 of the 16,000 EMTs in Wisconsin are volunteers. "It is making it harder to get volunteers.

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"You have to ask, if we put all these people through additional training, how much are we going to reduce a number (of ambulance crashes) that is already low?"

News

Lucinda "Cindy" L. Theune, 50, died from a head injury she received in the collision in April.

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Theune, who was an intensive care and emergency room nurse, was traveling east through a green light on Summit Ave. in Waukesha when her 2001 Mazda Protégé was struck on the passenger side by a Kettle Moraine Ambulance at 9:40 a.m.

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The ambulance, with its lights and sirens operating, was going north on Meadowbrook Road, carrying a physician and two nurses in addition to the attendants. The accident occurred when the ambulance was taking a perinatal team from Waukesha Memorial Hospital to Oconomowoc Memorial Hospital.

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Driver had training

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Ted Larsen, owner of Kettle Moraine Ambulance, said the ambulance driver, Jenifer D. Dalleska, 22, of Hartland completed a "top of the line training course" for emergency vehicle driving offered by the State Patrol.

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"We try and get all our drivers through that," Larsen said, adding that employees receive the training when it is available and compatible with their work schedules.

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No state database or other clearinghouse of information exists for the public to check on the driving records of ambulance drivers in their community, according to Carla Vigue, the spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Family Services, which licenses first responders.

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Theune's attorney, Jerome Hierseman, said changing the administrative code to require training and certification would ensure that private ambulance drivers have access to the same kind of training as municipal emergency vehicle operators.

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"There needs to be some uniformity at the state level so everyone is not doing their own thing," Theune said.

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Larsen and Hunjadi said it would be more useful to have private providers consider their criteria for dispatching crews with emergency lights and siren, the conditions under which most ambulance crashes occur.

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"The national statistics suggest that 10% or less of the patients transported need to go with lights and siren," Hunjadi said. "In many cases, running with lights and siren doesn't save enough time to justify it."

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Changes advocated

Theune and Bucher also advocate allowing private ambulance services to have the capability to change traffic signals at intersections they approach so they would have a green light while cross traffic would have a red light. Theune also said ambulances should be required to stop at controlled intersections.

"That would have saved my wife's life," he said. "What good is it to attempt to help people and save lives if you kill someone in the process?"

One of Theune's state legislators, Rep. Dan Vrakas (R-Town of Delafield), said technological advances such as intersection override devices as well as a law change concerning driver training are worth exploring.

"We all need to work together to make these situations as safe as possible," Vrakas said. "Is it as simple as changing the law? I don't know."

Reid J. Epstein of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

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