

Introduction

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Kirsten Barber: You're listening to the NCDPS Safety Scoop, a podcast that dives into the stories of the people, programs and resources within the North Carolina Department of Public Safety.

[Pause]

Each episode, we'll give you the scoop from department personnel on how NCDPS enhances the safety of the people of North Carolina.

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Season 4 Episode 2

Kirsten: There are times where something unexpected happens to us, and we have to make the best decision possible in the moment with the knowledge that we have. Moments like these can be stressful and can even cause you to analyze after the fact to determine if you made the right choices. Preparation is one of the cornerstones of the Department of Public Safety's mission, and we are committed to providing safety tips so residents and visitors of North Carolina can feel confident and safe no matter the situation. In this episode, I teamed up with the North Carolina State Highway Patrol's Public Information Office to collect answers to some of their most-asked questions with the goal of providing a resource to motorists for common roadway scenarios. From fender benders and flat tires to seeing those blue lights flash behind you, First Sergeant Chris Knox and Sergeant Marcus Bethea detail steps you can take to respond properly and, most importantly, stay safe. Now, let's meet our guests.

1st Sgt. Chris Knox: Well, I'm Chris Knox. I'm a first sergeant with the State Highway Patrol, and I oversee our Public Information Office based out of Patrol Headquarters in Raleigh. I've spent a majority of my career in the Greensboro area and have been in this office working in several different roles, uh, for about eight years now.

Sgt. Marcus Bethea: Hello! I'm Sergeant Marcus Bethea, a sergeant with the State Highway Patrol. I've been with the Patrol since 2008. Prior to that, I did some local law enforcement time. I started my career roughly in 2002, so I've done this my entire adult life. Had a great time with the Patrol. Spent much of my first years of my career in the Fayetteville area, and I have since been here in the Raleigh area and, uh, been with the Public Information Office for five years.

Kirsten: Can one of you give our listeners an idea of what the Public Information Office does within the State Highway Patrol?

1st Sgt. Knox: The, uh, North Carolina State Highway Patrol's Public Information Office has really broad, uh, area of responsibility. So, w-we communicate to North Carolinians and visitors to our state on, uh, things that are going on within our agency, things we can do to help the motoring public. We coordinate things with information to media affiliates. We oversee press events and things that we hold with the press. We handle public records requests that come into our agency, social media accounts that Sgt. Bethea oversees. We also, uh, craft speaking points for—for members who attend public events. We plan public events that we do throughout the state and, uh, campaigns that we're involved in such as Operation Litter Sweep or Operation Drive to Live; just various campaigns aimed at promoting awareness on—on various traffic safety issues. We also are involved in our state's Emergency Operations Center for winter weather events and—and things along those lines.

Kirsten: That's a great segue into this episode. This is going to be a question/answer style, a what-if, a resource that motorists across the state—whether they are residents of the state or visitors—that they can use to know what to do if they are in a scenario, um, where they feel unsafe on the road or if they have to interact with members of the State Highway Patrol. So, first off, we'll start out: what do I do if I'm in a collision?

Sgt. Bethea: All right, I'll touch on that. Um. And of course, just for simplicity's sake, we'll, you know, keep it cut-and-dried, just a, you know, your minor fender bender. We're not talking serious injury. We're not talking outrageous circumstances. You're in that rush-hour traffic, and you get that five-mile-an-hour rear-ender. And as frustrating as that can be, now it's, you know, totally diverted the entire course of your day. If you're in-involved in a minor collision, the first step is to make sure there are no injuries, both for yourself or anyone else around you. Um, take a moment to look at your surroundings, know your location, know where you are. That's very important.

You want to call emergency responders. Let us come out and investigate the matter. That's going to be your best bet. Eh, we can start to go down different lines and directions in terms of what should be deemed to be called in, what should not. For simplicity again, I say go ahead and call it in. Let us come out there and take a look, and we'll advise you on what your options are. You know, there are situations where you can make an agreement amongst the other parties that "Hey, we're not going to call this in. We can handle this amongst ourselves. Let's go on about our way." But a lot of times, that can backfire on you to where somebody changes their mind and says, "You know what? I need some documentation." Or they might speak with their insurance company, and they tell them, "You know what? We need some official documentation." And the next thing you know, they're calling us back. It really makes things messy to try and investigate these after the fact, so if you're involved in a minor collision, pull your vehicle off the road, make sure you're in a safe place, and call us. And

let us come out and take a look, and we'll—we'll advise you on what you need to do from there.

Kirsten: Now, Sgt. Bethea, what if someone is injured in that scenario?

Sgt. Bethea: So, when dealing with injuries, this takes things up to another level, of course. So, injuries are very important to—to assess and treat immediately. So, if you're involved in a collision, whether it's you or another party that is injured, by all means call 911. Give as thorough of a description as possible of what's going on. It is important and imperative to be calm, to be succinct, to be descriptive in what you're telling the operator. Some people, of course, it might be our first time having an experience like that and it can be overwhelming, but we cannot help people if they can't tell us where they are. We can't help people if they can't tell us what the injuries are. You know, we need to know that information. So, by all means, call it in. Be as calm and descriptive as you can.

Treat those with injuries to the best of your ability if you can. If you are in a dangerous position, by all means, don't put yourself in a more dangerous position to where you can get hurt or even otherwise killed if you're not careful. If you're on a major interstate and traffic is coming by you at high speeds, you have to be very careful and cognizant of what's going on. So, call 911, let law enforcement and emergency responders come out. Move to a safe place if you can, and, um, definitely help others if—if at all possible.

Kirsten: First Sergeant Knox, is there a difference if I'm in a collision on a highway verse a residential road?

1st Sgt. Knox: There's really not a difference. Uh, when you're involved in a collision as, uh, Sergeant Bethea alluded to how to contact law enforcement, where it occurs might depend on who shows up. So, if it occurs, uh, on a—on a highway or a residential area, on an interstate or even in a parking lot, depending on where it occurs, whether it's in a municipality or it's outside of a municipality, that—that would be basically who shows up. So, if you're within a city limits, most cities—with substantial populations have law enforcement agencies, have—have a police department that oversees them. So, they will most likely be the one that responds. Uh, anything that occurs, uh, outside of city limits, uh, would typically fall under the State Highway Patrol. Our state has approximately 80,000 miles of roadway, and we have approximately 1,600 troopers that are patrolling these interstates. So, we would be the one that would most likely respond out. It could be that it occurs in a parking lot, but it's—it's a reportable collision. It would need to be notified to law enforcement. And again, just depending on where it happens, uh, whether it's in a city or not, that's going to be who's going to show up, who's going to help you and, um, who's—who's going to handle the report for that—that specific location.

Kirsten: Sgt. Bethea, what do I do if I get a flat tire or experience other vehicle troubles on the road?

Sgt. Bethea:

If you get a flat tire while you're traveling, uh, again, try to get your vehicle to a safe place and off the road, if possible. Um, that's going to be key. We definitely don't want you in traffic or blocking traveling because that can basically cause a chain reaction and cause another crash. Different people have different tools and resources at their disposal. Uh, some may have a spare tire. Some may have the appropriate jack and—and wrench and everything that's needed to change a tire. Some others may not. So, for those that are, you know, equipped with a spare tire and the tools to change the tire, again, make sure you're doing it in a safe place. Make sure your spare tire has air in it. You know, this is something that a lot of us, e-even I've been guilty of it. You know, many of us can go *years* without touching our spare tire. And by the time you finally do need it, it doesn't have air. Um, so it's very important to periodically check your tire pressure, not only on your actual vehicle but even your spare tire as well. Make sure... Just like we talk about hurricane season and having those kits ready, make sure your vehicle equipment is ready. So, if you're in a position to change that tire on your own, just please do so safely. Make sure you're off the road in a safe position. If it's at night, make sure you're in a well-lit environment.

In the event that you might not have those, you know, resources available to you, do you have a roadside assistance membership? You know, that's going to be another good option. A lot of times when you purchase a new car, it comes with some sort of roadside assistance for a certain time period. Uh, even through your insurance company, you might have these perks. In this day and age, I mean it comes with cell phone plans. It comes with other types of subscriptions. I mean, they're all over the place, so utilize those resources if they're available to you. That's one less thing you have to worry about if you can have a professional come and do it.

Um, if all else fails, you can call emergency responders, whether it be your local, uh, police department or your local 911 center or even the Highway Patrol Communications Center. We do have some connections with the iMap and—and—and S-safety Patrol resources that can come out and assist you as well. And again, you might find yourself stranded to where you're partially or even fully in a travel lane, and you're just kind of in a very dangerous spot. We can send a trooper out there to stand by and assist you to make sure traffic doesn't become a problem.

1st Sgt. Kox:

Yeah, uh, Sergeant, uh, Bethea alluded to the, uh, iMap, and some might not know what that is, the Motorists Assistance. That's a service performed by NCDOT. They're—they're also called their—their Safety Patrol. So, I—I know we had a lot of questions come up, uh, just this previous year about, uh, "What exactly, uh, will the Highway Patrol or can DOT do to help me?" There was s-some chatter around social media that we would come to your house and—and change your oil and...

[Laughs]

And things like that, and that's not true. Uh, what the NCDOT Safety Patrol will do: uh, if you have a breakdown, in certain areas of the state, so it's predominantly on interstates, predominantly in urban areas where you will see these white trucks that says NCDOT, uh, Geico Safety Patrol. And that Safety Patrol, in—in those approved areas and times and roadways, do perform certain functions when you're broke down on the highways in these areas. They—they help change tires. They can give you a gallon of gas. They can give you a jumpstart. We have to make sure people understand, uh, you know, if you—you don't know which areas are covered, you don't know which times of day that they're covering those interstates, if you go to, uh, DOT's website, it breaks down more about what the Safety Patrol can do and they're allowed to do, uh, in those given areas.

Kirsten: That's very interesting. I learned something new today. To stay on that, um, experiencing car troubles on the highway or other roadways throughout the state, North Carolina is a place that has very tight-knit communities, people, um, with servant's hearts. What would you say to people who feel called to pull over and assist whenever they see someone, um, struggling on the side of the road?

Sgt. Bethea: That's, uh, that's a very good standpoint to take, and I'm glad you brought that up because there are certainly good Samaritans out there who are eager to lend that helping hand. Um, unfortunately, we have also seen good Samaritans find themselves in dangerous positions to where they are victims of a car crash or, um, victims of injury while simply trying to help, so again, we certainly appreciate those added eyes being out there seeing what's going and that added assistance, but if you're going to assist someone, especially in a major, traffic-related incident, *please* be careful. Please, again, assess your surroundings, make sure you're doing so safely, and if it does not appear to be a safe situation, call us. Let us come and—and do what we do to help to calm the situation. But again, we're not certainly going to tell people *not* to be helpful or tell people not to be good stewards when trying to look out for others, but safety is paramount, and we want everyone involved to be as safe as possible.

Kirsten: First Sergeant Knox, what do I do—not that this would *ever* happen to me—but, if it did, what do I do if I'm pulled over by a trooper?

1st Sgt. Knox: Well, the first thing you must do is pull over. So...

[Laughs]

Uh, we—we need to, uh, have that—that acknowledgment, right? Uh, we need people to, uh, let us know that—that they see us, and we see them, so acknowledge that—that we're there. Uh, you can turn on your four-way flashers, turn on your interior light, just something that—that—that lets us know that you see us and that you're going to comply.

Pull over in the closest and safest place possible. For us, the right side of the roadway is going to be the best every time. Uh, you could be on a multi-lane

highway in the far left-hand lane. Do not pull into the median. Fight that urge of pulling to the closest place to you with what might not be the best place for you. So, begin to signal and work your way over to the—the right side of the road and get as far off the roadway as possible. That—that is for—for our safety, obviously, and we appreciate that, but it's also for the—the person that we're stopping, their safety. We've seen time and again where law enforcement, first responders are—are struck on the sides of the road, um, but also people that are out there with us could be struck. It's for their safety and ours, so first thing, uh, acknowledge our presence, pull over to a safe location. If you can get off the side of the road, if you can get off onto a ramp, uh, of a roadway, or if you can pull into a parking lot or a driveway, those are all places that are going to be safer for you as the person being stopped as well as us.

Stay in your vehicle. W-we don't need you to exit the vehicle. That might be something we ask you to do later on, but if you'll stay in your vehicle, turn that interior light on, keep your hands on the steering wheel, uh, an officer may approach from the driver's side or the passenger's side. Be alert. Do some of those things that let us know that—that you see us, uh, that you're complying and that, uh, you're—you're treating this as a—a safe encounter for both, uh, you and them.

Let's say you have a weapon in the vehicle. That's common. We just want to know about it. When the officer makes contact with you, that should be the first thing you tell them. Let them know that you have a weapon, where the weapon is. Again, keep your hands in a safe location. If they want you to do anything with that weapon, they will tell you, but do not make any movements. Don't do anything other than inform them. That way, they can make—take the next steps to keep both of you safe.

You'll be asked to provide information, typically your—your driver's license, your registration, insurance information for that vehicle. Again, don't go for that until you're being asked to get that. It—it's all about your safety, where your hands are at, ensuring that—that your movements are not something intended to cause us harm. Unfortunately, law enforcement is a dangerous profession, and one of the most dangerous things we do are traffic stops, so us just having good communication with each other, not doing anything until you're asked to do that. It really can be a smooth process. It can be about mutual respect. We respect you in—in your role as someone who's being stopped. We understand it's stress—it's a stressful time for you. It's a stressful time for us, but having that mutual respect, understanding where—where each person's coming from. And none of that mutual respect means you agree with what's happening. It doesn't mean you're guilty of anything. It just means that you're trying to keep this a safe encounter. And then if you do receive a citation, you take that citation and realize that it's not an admission of guilt. You know, it can be a safe encounter, an easy encounter, but—but it's something that us as law enforcement and you as the person being stopped have to work together, uh, to make sure it goes smoothly.

Kirsten:

So, Sergeant Bethea, what happens next? What do I do once I receive that citation or a ticket as some people call it?

Sgt. Bethea:

We've had a long-standing partnership with an organization called putonthebrakes.org [Put on the Brakes dot org] which, uh, evolves around safe driving techniques for teenage drivers. And I say that to say this. You know, when we do presentations with these groups, we'll often speak to these teen drivers, and this question comes up. "What do I do if I get stopped?" or "What do I do if I get a ticket?" And here's how I phrase this to them because I think this is kind of my best way to sum this up. And what I tell them is if the ultimate happens and you receive a citation, don't freak out. It's that simple. Don't freak out. Nothing is set in stone on the roadside, so if you receive a citation on the roadside, your driver's license is not going to go away. Your vehicle's not going to be taken from you. There's no penalty that's assessed right there on the spot. There's a process, and a lot of people kind of lose touch with that. They think that "Oh my God, this has just happened to me. Everything is over!" And it's not. There's a process. So, don't freak out.

Now, that process entails, usually, a court appearance. Sometimes you're given the option to pay a fee in lieu of going to court, and that's the same as accepting responsibility for the violation as is, and that's—that's anyone's decision if they want to do that, but you have that option and that ability to go to a court appearance and basically tell your side of what's going on and also get information about other options that are available to you to resolve the matter. And believe it or not, the court system is very forgiving. It really is. And a lot of times it's to people's benefit to go to that court appearance and speak to them because a lot of times they can offer options that will help you out of your situation rather than hurt you.

Um, so, it's very important to follow through with that legal process, and whether you are a young teenage driver—driver or a seasoned adult driver, it's very important to follow through and make sure you complete that process. Don't just ignore it. Don't turn it away. This can basically turn into bigger problems for you if you don't resolve it. This could cause problems for your driver's license. This could cause problems for your insurance policy if you don't follow through with a citation, even if it's something as simple as expired registration or you didn't wear your seat belt. What you perceive to be as minor can turn into something major if you don't take care of it. Um, so that's very important, but again, if that—the worst happens and you receive a citation, let the court system run its course. Let the judicial process run its course. A lot of times, it ends up being more beneficial, um, then you would really think and realize.

Now, that being said, going back to what First Sergeant Knox was saying, it all begins on the roadside. When you go to that court appearance (and this could be weeks, maybe even months after the fact), that judge is going to ask, "Was that person cooperative? Was that person polite?" They're going to ask that. They're going to ask that of the trooper. And that can play a role in the judge's

decision, so what happens on the roadside is very important because that can set the stage for how the outcome turns out for you. So, it's very important to be polite, be courteous and be honest about what happened. If you know you made a mistake, be honest. We all make mistakes.

That being said, we expect the same of our troopers. We expect our troopers to be courteous, to be polite and to be professional. It's a two-way street. And again, when those two things align, a lot of times these outcomes are very positive in the very end, when it's all done. And again, we're out here continuing on to spread the message of traffic safety and awareness. And those motorists may very well have learned that "Okay, let me modify this particular driving behavior. Let me tell others about it so they know what can happen if they do the same thing." And again, that message is being spread, and at the end of the day, I think everyone is in a much better place.

Kirsten:

Final question of this episode: First Sergeant Knox, what do I do if I see someone driving recklessly on a North Carolina roadway?

1st Sgt. Knox:

Something that we've, uh, run into recently and—and really seems to be a trend is, um, road rage. And—and that starts, uh... What it seems, when we hear stories of this, is that when someone witnesses someone do something that is reckless or dangerous, uh, they engage with this driver, so that—that would be the first t-tip is to not engage. Allow someone who has done something that is reckless or dangerous, uh, to get space from you. Don't—don't engage with them. Don't get closer to them. Don't let them know that you're upset with them and create a situation out of a situation.

Uh, if it's something that rises to the level of—of needing to contact law enforcement, uh, and that person is—is driving dangerously on the road, you can report that to 911. You can report that directly to the Highway Patrol. So, if you do need to call the Highway Patrol, it's simple. From your cell phone, it's *HP. So, *HP is, uh, that would be *47 on your phone, uh, and that would go directly to a Highway Patrol Communication Center versus a 911 Center in the—the county of the occurrence. When you contact that Highway Patrol center, uh, they will want basic information about, well, what type of vehicle it is, what is it doing, where is it going, the direction of travel.

You know, common things that we get calls about are, uh, people weaving in and out of lanes, speeding, uh, someone possibly being impaired or being on their phone. We get calls about someone brandishing a gun. We get—w—we get a whole slew of different types of calls, uh, that come into our Communications Center. What they're able to do is either to broadcast that out to troopers who are working in that area which they hopefully would be there and could get that car stopped if they visually see them engaging in this behavior, and—and then they could take the appropriate action. So, uh, you know, just the number one rule is—is—is don't get involved in whatever this person is doing. If it rises to the level of reporting to us, that *47 or that *HP number is—is going to be, uh, the best avenue for that. That way, they can then get it out to members who are in

the area and let them address the concern or hopefully get the vehicle stopped, uh, before something tragic happens.

Kirsten: Well, thank you both for answering some of our top questions for North Carolina roadways.

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I hope everyone finds it informative and helpful.

Conclusion

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Kirsten: This is the Safety Scoop, a podcast written, produced and edited by the NCDPS communications team. The mission of the North Carolina Department of Public Safety is to safeguard and preserve the lives and property of the people of North Carolina through preparation, prevention and protection with integrity and honor. Follow the department on social media for a closer look at ongoing initiatives and resources. We're on Facebook, X and Instagram at NC Public Safety. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe to the Safety Scoop on your favorite podcast app. I'm your host, Kirsten Barber. Thanks for listening.

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