

Look out for yourself – look out for your mates

by Dan Sullivan

As road works start to ramp up again following the relaxation of the COVID-19 restrictions, we will all again be exposed to the traffic hazards associated with working on and near roads.

TMAA continues the “Your Speed is Our Safety” and “See the Cones – Obey the Zones” campaigns aimed at encouraging drivers to behave respectfully at road worksites and to look out for road workers. We want all drivers to respect our workers, sites, signs and drive according to the sign posted speed limits.

Despite this, there continues to be some drivers whose behaviour is so blatantly dangerous it is likely that no amount of messaging will change their driving habits. Drivers travelling at 30, 40, 50km/h over the posted temporary speed limit at worksites. Speeds recorded at over 160km/h. Drivers caught under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Drivers distracted by their mobile phones and other devices. These drivers are likely to continue to represent a hazard to all temporary traffic management workers on and near roads no matter what we say to them. Several crashes in recent years have involved temporary traffic management workers being hit by vehicles being driven in ways blatantly disobeying the road rules. Working on or near roads will continue to be inherently hazardous because of poor drivers.

Unfortunately, there are also those cases where an otherwise safe driver can suffer from a medical incident. In the past I investigated fatal road crashes on behalf of road agencies and sometimes about 20% have involved a driver having a medical incident while driving. Heart attacks, strokes, blackouts and other conditions are the most common. These drivers often through no fault of their own can suddenly be a significant hazard to temporary traffic management workers. There are recorded crashes with temporary traffic management staff being hit by vehicles being driven by a driver who suffers a medical incident. The recent fatality of four police officers in Victoria allegedly involved the truck driver suffering a medical incident. Uncontrolled traffic incidents that result in hazards for those working on or near roads, will continue.

In some cases, otherwise compliant drivers can simply make a mistake which can lead to hazards to temporary traffic management workers. Being distracted by merging lanes, pedestrians at the side of the road, trying to read a combination of temporary and permanent signs, or in one case changing stations on the car radio at the wrong moment can lead to a driver simply making a mistake or not seeing a temporary traffic management worker near the road.

There are recorded crashes with temporary traffic management staff being hit by vehicles being driven by a driver who simply makes a mistake. There will continue to be driver mistakes that result in hazards for those working on or near roads.

Recently guidelines have been published for those planning, designing, and implementing temporary traffic management, for those controlling traffic and for those organisations managing works on or near roads or the road asset owners. This guidance is aimed at improving how sites are designed, implemented and managed so that risks to road workers and the public are reduced.

Many road authorities and contractors are now requiring the use of technology to remove traffic controllers from the road. Portable light weight traffic signals and portable boom barriers all can be used so that traffic controllers can be positioned several metres away from traffic.

The TMAA also continues to advocate for major improvement to the training available for those working on or near roads.

A lot of change is happening to improve safety for temporary traffic management workers but working on and near roads will remain hazardous.

What else should workers be looking to do to improve their personal safety?

As I have travelled the country between January and March 2020, I have seen significant improvements in the layout of road works sites, and significant improvements in the way many temporary traffic management staff interact with drivers.

However, one matter still concerns me greatly. I continue to see what I can only describe as a level of complacency from some workers with regards to the level of hazard that they expose themselves to. In these cases, I look at the way that they are undertaking their tasks and can often readily identify ways to significantly improve their safety. Some examples I have seen include;

- Three workers early one morning, looking like they were waiting to start work – standing at the edge of the road in front of the road safety barrier while traffic, including many trucks were travelling at 100km/h.
- The worker managing a barrier board across a blocked lane on a CBD road by simply leaning on the middle of the barrier board with his back to approaching traffic. All it would take is one driver to make a mistake. He could have easily stood on the footpath to manage the barrier board but would then not have had something to lean on.

- The worker I saw using his vehicle to block the middle lane on a major six lane road with only a barrier line between opposing directions of traffic. The worker then placed his plans on the bonnet to review them. Anyone running into his vehicle from either direction would almost definitely have resulted in at least severe injuries to the worker. It may be inconvenient not using the car bonnet to lay out his paperwork, but he could have moved off the road to a far safer location.
- The worker I saw supervising a line of cones blocking a lane by standing among the cones less than a metre from traffic and with his back to traffic. Could he have stood on the opposite side of the closed lane near the footpath and faced traffic?
- The traffic controller walking out into the middle of a busy CBD street to stop traffic with her back to approaching traffic and simply holding up her hand to stop approaching buses while she talked on her mobile phone. Clearly a case of not undertaking the Traffic Controller role in accordance with documented and trained procedures.
- The traffic management workers picking up signs and then walking along the left lane of a busy multi-lane road back to their vehicle with their back to traffic and no protection between them and traffic. They would have had to walk a little further on a grassy surface if they moved off the road but would have been less exposed to traffic.

Given that we know there are drivers who continue to behave poorly and blatantly ignore the posted speed limits and road rules, there are drivers who may suffer a medical incident, there are drivers who may be compliant but just make a mistake, all workers should do everything they can to minimise the hazards they expose themselves to.

Please always look for the safest possible place to undertake work, to manage the TTM or where to stand when waiting for other activities. I encourage every worker to always ask – do I really need to be here now?

Principles that I apply myself at every road worksite I visit, and which I taught my children while they were growing up included.

- Looking out for traffic even if I have the right of way when crossing the road. It is no good being in the right as I will be the one to be hurt in a crash.
- Walking as far away from traffic as I can safely do so.

- Walk in the direction facing the oncoming traffic where I can.
- When standing near a road moving as far away from traffic as possible and putting barriers between me and traffic where I can.
- Don't remain standing near traffic unless it is a key element of the activity I am undertaking.

All of these can equally apply for all temporary traffic management workers and I encourage every worker to try to apply these principles wherever they can.

Better designs will improve safety. A level of police enforcement will improve safety, but police cannot be at every site all of the time. Education of drivers should improve safety. But the cases identified in this article demonstrate that it is not possible to eliminate all hazards to workers. Therefore, I always like to ask – What more can you do to take control of your personal safety?

As well as looking out for yourself – look out for your mates. If you see your fellow worker standing or doing a task in an unsafe way, suggest that they stand somewhere else or undertake their works looking towards traffic instead of away from it. If you see a vehicle approaching that looks like it will create a hazard, let your mates know so that you can all get out of the way.

Look out for your own safety – Look out for your mates safety as well.

Let's all work together to make our workplaces as safe as we can.

Dan Sullivan

Founding Director – Solutions in Transport

Providing expertise and support for the Temporary Traffic Management Industry

e dan.sullivan@solutionsintransport.com.au

m 0423 782 189