

Seattle  
Community  
Police Commission

January 31, 2023

VIA EMAIL

Adrian Diaz, Chief  
Seattle Police Department

Dear Chief Diaz,

On Monday evening, January 23, 2023, a Seattle Police vehicle reportedly struck and killed a pedestrian in a crosswalk at a South Lake Union intersection during a response in support of the Seattle Fire Department to a drug overdose call for service – a priority one call. This tragedy for the victim, her family, and the community raises important questions regarding SPD safety training and policy related to emergency operation of police vehicles.

As you know, both police pursuits and emergency operations of police vehicles during calls for service are inherently dangerous for motorists, pedestrians, and responding officers. Current SPD Operations Manual Section 13.031 – Vehicle Eluding/Pursuits – places significant and specific restrictions on police pursuits of eluding vehicles. However, there appears to be comparatively much less guidance in the SPD Operations Manual related to the safe operation of a patrol vehicle during an emergency call for service response.

Specifically, SPD Operations Manual Section 13.030 – Emergency Vehicle Operations – states that an officer may operate a police vehicle “in a manner that is substantially outside of a normal traffic pattern ... only when the need outweighs the risk.” Additionally, an officer “shall modify their emergency response ... when the totality of the circumstances indicates the risk of continuing the emergency driving outweighs the need.” Above all, “preservation of life is the highest priority.”

Even where pedestrian infrastructure is strong and protective, there is inherent risk to the public when officers operate police vehicles outside of a normal traffic pattern. To ensure preservation of life is the highest priority, it is critical for the public to understand how SPD trains its officers on emergency vehicle operations and on SPD Operations Manual Section 13.030.

To this end, we respectfully request responses to the following questions:

1. What training do SPD officers receive related to emergency driving and SPD Operations Manual Section 13.030? How frequently are officers expected to update their training?

2. What factors are SPD officers instructed to consider when determining when the totality of the circumstances indicates the risk of continuing the emergency driving outweighs the need?
3. What limits or constraints are imposed on emergency driving? What factors require an officer to slow down during an emergency response, or to operate the vehicle within a normal traffic pattern?
4. Does the priority level of the call for service limit the degree to which an officer may operate a police vehicle in a manner that is substantially outside of a normal traffic pattern? If so, how?
5. If there is a collision with a pedestrian or motorist during an emergency response, what is the SPD expectation of the officer to stop and perform life saving measures? What is the SPD training and policy on the officer's duty to render aid in this circumstance?

Citizens deserve timely and safe police responses during emergencies and calls for service. We look forward to your prompt responses to our questions.

Sincerely,



Reverend Patricia Hunter,  
Co-Chair



Reverend Harriett Walden,  
Co-Chair



Joel Merkel, Co-Chair