

Police Explain What To Do In a Traffic Stop

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Many drivers pulled over by a police officer aren't aware of the proper procedure to follow when flashing lights suddenly appear behind them. The question of what exactly a driver should do has come up following a felony traffic stop by Paducah police several weeks ago that generated extensive news coverage.

Local officers say drivers often don't know the first step: how to pull over. McCracken County Chief Deputy Mike Turnbow explained that it's state law for drivers to pull a vehicle over as far to the right as possible and stop. Turnbow explained that some citizens may think slowing down is enough, but he said it's not, especially on curved roads and hills.

Paducah Police Captain Jason Merrick said drivers tend to hesitate to pull over to the far right when on multiple-lane highways, but they should still always pull off to the right shoulder. After being stopped, drivers should keep their hands on the steering wheel. "When they disappear, reaching for a purse or glove box, it automatically goes through my mind: 'What are they doing?' And my stress level goes up," Turnbow said. While it may be a reflex for some to reach for the glove compartment or console to find proof of insurance, officers don't know what drivers may be reaching for.

Some officers approach vehicles on the driver's side while others choose the safer option of speaking to drivers through the passenger side window. Turnbow said drivers should wait for an officer's instructions before reaching for any documents. "If you have a legal firearm in the car ... there's nothing wrong with saying, hey, there's a firearm in the car. Especially if it's in the glove box," Turnbow said. Merrick seconded the same concern. "Somebody who has a concealed carry is normally a law-abiding citizen, they're not thinking their gun is in the console, they're thinking their insurance is in the console," he said. Regardless, police don't know that. "If you put your hands on a firearm, you'll be looking at one," Turnbow said. It helps to store registration and insurance cards in the same place. Turnbow said he's often waited five minutes for drivers to find their documents within their vehicles.

Today, however, some drivers can access it more quickly via technology. "What is unusual now ... they may pull it up on their iPhone or iPad," Turnbow said. Officers will often go back to their mobile data terminals in their vehicles and check on insurance information. If they issue a citation, they'll explain how to take care of it.

While the traffic stop may seem to be over, Turnbow said he's seen drivers make a big mistake before leaving the side of the road. "What we really appreciate is, you look in the mirror and check for traffic before you pull out," he said. He said drivers have hit or clipped other vehicles while pulling away from a traffic stop on several occasions. "Then we get to do all kinds of stuff, again," he said. Turnbow said it's customary for an officer to leave their lights flashing until a driver leaves the road. Other misconceptions around traffic stops, Turnbow said, include the idea that one can talk their way out of a ticket. Rather, he said, it's the other way around. "There are times when people talk themselves into tickets," he said. Merrick said officers generally have their minds made up before they get out of their vehicle if they're going to issue a ticket. Both Turnbow and Merrick said neither the sheriff's department nor city police have quotas they must meet on ticket numbers. "That's not the case at all. We don't have a quota system.

We encourage officers to courageously take action, that's what we want our guys to do," Merrick said. Turnbow said there also are no speed traps in the county. Though no sheriff's deputies are assigned full-time to traffic duty, the department has received grant money that will help with more traffic patrols in coming months. Police aren't looking just for speeding drivers but for other high-risk driving behavior, such as failing to yield right-of-way, not paying attention and following too closely. Essentially, Merrick said, the best way to go about a traffic stop is to be calm. "We're not bad guys, just people," he said. "Be nice to us and we'll be nice to you."