

# “Growing” Respect as First Responders

By Jamie Magaldi, PE, MCA

I bet you can relate to this one. It’s 5:30 p.m. on a weeknight, traffic is heavy. The storm came earlier than predicted. Your tree crew is primed, saws are sharp, fluid reservoirs are full and LED emergency beacon lights are flashing. There’s a 30-inch DBH oak across a main artery in town, yet your crews can’t get there to clear it because nobody, and I mean nobody, in the hectic commute will give your crew an inch. Your bucket truck can’t safely pass without people yielding to the right, and your chip-truck crew modestly waits, hopeful for a driver in the line of traffic who understands the urgency of our line of work to allow them to make the turn, proceed through the traffic light or pass to the correct lane.

Commuters grow angry at the situation, only to grow more impatient and greedy to protect their line in the queue. The frustration spirals, unfortunately, and the irony is never quite grasped. The fact of the matter is, if commuters just let the cleanup crew through, the traffic would clear more quickly. Mothers would get home to help with homework. Fathers would make the recital. And the well-respected police and fire crews wouldn’t be waiting for us to arrive to help clear the situation so they can finish their active roles as first responders, clearing accident scenes and tending to victims.

Those of us in the industry share this common experience and for years have conceded to the perception that public respect for first responders is limited to local police and fire departments. After all, these men and women have historically earned their respect as they put their lives on the line responding to difficult and dangerous situations, responding at all hours of the night and sometimes putting the wants and needs of their loved ones sec-



*The American Public Works Association (APWA) Board of Directors released an official Public Works First Responder symbol in November 2017 as a proactive means to raise awareness of the critical role we perform as emergency responders. Graphic courtesy of the author.*

ond to the overall needs of the general public during a time of crisis. These hard-working public-safety officials do deserve our respect. But the time is far overdue, my colleagues, to advocate for our own obvious roles as emergency-management personnel.

A January 2019 *USA Today* publication lists commercial-logging work as the No. 2 most dangerous job. Many of us who are in a tree-related field would probably agree with this, but the irony is that few would believe the same publication lists police work and firefighting as No. 18 and No. 24, respectively. Why are we selling ourselves short? Why can’t we garner a similar respect as ambulances who motivate trained drivers to instinctively yield to the side of the road when they are approaching with emergency lights illuminated? Or the same respect that police officers receive from a group of preschool-aged children who imitate their parents fist pumps, claps and cheers when a cruiser drives by on patrol?

Tree workers and, for that matter, all public and private agencies that provide emergency roadside response deserve the same respect for all the same reasons. Our workers have specialized skills that often are taken for granted – until they are

needed in time of crisis. It’s similar to the workhorse sump pump in your basement that sits thanklessly until unrelenting spring groundwater makes us utter a loud sigh of relief to own one, and makes us think we’d gladly pay triple its price for it since the local hardware stores have sold out.

We’re climbing precarious trees, rigging challenging limb geometry and elevating our buckets to heights that would make Icarus shudder. We’re clearing roadblocks, removing trees from cars prior to fire crews extricating victims, helping to restore electricity and making crucial decisions on risk management and environmentally sensitive invasive-species control. We’re also providing ancillary support by plowing snow, salting streets and clearing flooded roads, making certain those vital vehicular arteries are open for the other two, more widely respected blue and red emergency-response personnel to be able to do their jobs in a crisis. Our emergency lights are illuminated, but all too often our needs for buffer space around the emergency vehicle go unmet.

We don’t work in shifts. We work until the safety-sensitive situation is rectified and peace is reasonably restored. Our cell

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## From the Field

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phones are ringing all hours of the night, our vacations are sometimes interrupted and our work-life balances are sometimes altered by the call of the job, to the dismay of our frustrated but ultimately understanding spouses. We've bled a little and sweat a lot, earning our right to go home safely at the end of a crisis response. We've earned the respect.

The American Public Works Association (APWA) Board of Directors released an official Public Works First Responder symbol in November 2017 as a proactive means to raise awareness of the critical role we perform as emergency responders. The symbol represents the industry's importance and stance to be taken seriously as a crucial member of public-safety personnel. The push is on to energize our perception as emergency responders and help boost our well-earned integrity alongside our blue and red hardworking colleagues.

Until we start believing in our own critical roles as emergency-management

personnel, we will never be able to break the longstanding perception of triviality and remind the public that public-works responders are indeed the true "Silent Arm of Public Safety." Help the public-works community spread the word on the importance of treating tree and roadway-response crews with the same respect as the other two arms of emergency management, police and fire. Raising awareness of our vital roles as emergency personnel will not only help improve response time and job efficiency, but the safety of our teams will be maximized as the general public starts to become more aware of our presence on the roadways and at job sites.

Post the Public Works First Responder banner proudly and urge your town/city/county officials to share it with public websites, tweets and community boards. Encourage your leaders to allow your public-works crews to participate in local parades and community-support rallies. Perhaps in time, we can even help driver-education organizations teach students the importance of yielding to all emergency

responders, not just police and fire. Sowing the seeds of respect now may also help with future recruitment into this challenging and rewarding field, attracting young, motivated prospects to a lesser-known heroic path.

I offer to you, as genuine first responders, a thank you for all you continue to do, selflessly and unsung, for supporting other local emergency agencies as the often-forgotten Silent Arm of Public Safety, and for doing your job day in and day out to help our communities thrive during crisis. Let's continue to grow these seeds of respect into the mature and unquestioned authority we all know we should be perceived as.

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