



December 7, 2021

Come Home Safe: Amherst-Initiated Roadside Responder Safety Bill Becomes Law

By Rep. Katrina Shankland (D-Stevens Point)

On December 6, Governor Tony Evers signed Assembly Bill 297 into law at the Amherst Fire District, where it all began with one idea – protecting first responders from reckless drivers. The event was a reminder of the power of one person’s voice, and how together, we can make a lasting impact in our communities and state.

Over three years ago, Assistant Chief Brian Swan lit the spark for this effort. When a driver ran into a fire truck in nearby Waupaca, he knew it was time to take action, and he brought me and Sen. Testin to the station to discuss how to prevent it from happening in the future. Amherst Fire Chief Victor Voss joined us as we worked through ideas about how to tackle this through legislation, and our small initial group soon became a large coalition from across the state.

When I traveled to Endeavor to meet with the Endeavor/Moundville Fire Department, Chief Mike Bourdeau told me about a 34-year veteran firefighter, Larry Millard, who was struck and killed while responding to an accident site because a driver failed to move over. Chief Darren Jorgenson from Delton Fire Department came to the Capitol to meet with me, and shared that a Delton firefighter, Joe Sabol, was also struck and injured by a driver when responding to an incident.

I’m thankful that members of Larry’s family were able to attend the bill signing, where we paid tribute to his memory, and that Joe and Amanda Sabol were able to join us as well. The people who put their lives on the line to keep us safe every single day are owed our deepest thanks, humblest gratitude, and commitment to continue advocating for their safety.

Throughout the legislative process, we heard from first responders from all over Wisconsin who said they would much rather run into a burning building than respond to a roadside incident. They told us that they have gear to protect them from fires, but nothing to protect them from reckless drivers. Their families said that they worry most when their loved ones are called to respond to a highway incident. Everyone just wants their loved ones to *come home safe*.

This law provides our first responders with some new gear – through education, enhanced penalties for hurting a roadside worker, and a new emergency zone with double the penalties for infractions, including cell phone use. These provisions will help protect roadside responders and workers while educating everyone about the crucial responsibility to drive carefully, especially near an incident site. I hope that this new law will be an impetus for us all to do better and spark a statewide conversation about our responsibility to each other as neighbors and community members.

Sen. Joan Ballweg and Rep. Amy Loudbeck helped lead the charge in the Senate and Assembly this session, along with 16 statewide organizations representing fire, EMS, law enforcement, utility workers, tow truck drivers, and more. Together, we kept growing our coalition, pushing the bill forward. I especially appreciated that Amherst Fire Department, Plover Fire Department, and Stevens Point Fire Department came to the Capitol to testify in support.

I’m proud of the bipartisan work that got us here, and it was truly meaningful to celebrate this bill signing at the Amherst Fire District, where it all started. The next time someone asks you how a bill becomes a law, you have a powerful example of what can happen when we come together – without regard for party or geography – to work hard and get results so the next generation can be a little better protected than the ones before them.

Thank you to Governor Evers for signing this bill into law in the company of first responders, tow truck drivers, and people from all over Wisconsin who understand the vital importance of driver safety. Let’s make sure our roadside responders always come home safe.

Rep. Katrina Shankland (D-Stevens Point) represents Portage County in the Wisconsin State Assembly.