



What to Do and Expect When Stopped by Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officers conduct traffic stops because they observe a traffic violation or are conducting a police investigation. Being stopped by a law enforcement officer can be a stressful experience but knowing what to do during the stop will help ensure your safety, the safety of other motorists, and the safety of the officer.

When you see emergency lights behind you, stay calm, activate your turn signal, and pull off or to the side of the roadway as soon and safely as possible. Turn off the ignition and radio, and stay in your vehicle unless directed by the officer to exit. Keep your hands on the steering wheel so they are easily observable. Ask your passengers to remain calm and to stay in the vehicle while keeping their hands in plain view as well. Give the officer your full attention. Cell phones and mobile devices should not be used by you or any of your passengers. Do not make sudden moves or search for your driver's license or vehicle documents – wait for the officer to give you instructions. If you have a weapon(s) in the vehicle, inform the officer upon first contact.

If it's nighttime, the officer may direct a spotlight at your vehicle once stopped. To assist with visibility, turn on your interior lights as soon as you stop to help the officer see inside your vehicle.

The officer will usually explain why they stopped you and may ask you questions about your trip. If the officer isn't in uniform they will show you their law enforcement credentials or you may ask to see them. Follow all instructions the officer gives you or your passengers. The officer may ask to see your driver's license, proof of insurance, and vehicle registration. If the documents are out of your reach, tell the officer where they are before you reach for them. If you have questions, politely ask for clarification. If the officer asks you to exit the vehicle, stay safely away from traffic and keep your hands in plain view.

When the officer completes their interaction with you they may issue a warning or a traffic ticket which may include a fine. The officer will typically explain whatever action is being taken. If you have questions, respectfully ask the officer to clarify. If you disagree with the officer's decision to issue a traffic ticket, don't prolong the contact by arguing with the officer. If you wish to contest the ticket, you will have the opportunity to explain your point of view of what happened in court. Your acceptance and signature on a traffic ticket is not an admission of guilt however, the refusal to sign a traffic ticket may result in your arrest. If you believe the officer acted inappropriately, document the officer's behavior and report it to the officer's agency in a timely manner. The name of the officer and law enforcement agency will be on the ticket or you may ask the officer to provide this information.

The enforcement of traffic laws is an effective tool in changing unsafe driving behavior and reducing crashes. If you receive a warning or a ticket for a traffic violation, its purpose is to deter illegal and/or unsafe behavior. Good communication from all involved parties can make a traffic stop a safe experience for all parties involved.

This guidance was approved by the AAMVA Driver and Law Enforcement Standing Committees, and by the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

