

DARK SIGNALS

The power fails and traffic control signals are affected. Towns ask whether they should utilize the placement of temporary traffic control signs, such as stop signs or the like. The concern is that stop signs will still be located on the roads when the traffic signals are once again functioning, which would create a conflicting message to motorists approaching the controlled intersection. Such confusion can potentially increase the likelihood of motor vehicle accidents.

Many states require drivers to come to a full and complete stop at a dark signal. The presumption is that in this case, there has been a power outage at the intersection. Currently, Connecticut does not have any regulations that require a motorist to stop at a dark signal.

Despite the absence of Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) regulations or state law explicitly addressing dark signals, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) has adopted the “Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways” (MUTCD), which was approved by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) through the requirement set forth in the Chapter 23 CFR 655.603 which states:

A requirement for states to adopt the MUTCD or to adopt their own State MUTCD. Connecticut DOT decided to adopt the MUTCD approved by the FHWA and not their own.

Conn. General Statute Sec. 14-298-800. Uniformity:

- (a) All temporary traffic control devices used on road or street construction, maintenance work, or for incident management, shall be of the type approved by the Office of the State Traffic Administration and shall be in compliance with the provisions set forth in 23 CFR 655.603.
- (c) The decision to use a particular device at a particular location shall be made on the basis of either an engineering study or the application of engineering judgment as defined in the MUTCD.

Currently the adopted MUTCD states the following regarding Dark Signals:

(MUTCD – Pages 50-51)

Standard:

Because the potential for conflicting commands could create driver confusion, YIELD or STOP signs **shall not** be used in conjunction with any traffic control signal operation, except in the following cases:

- A. If the signal indication for an approach is a flashing red at all times;
- B. If a minor street or driveway is located within or adjacent to the area controlled by the traffic control signal, but does not require separate traffic signal control because an extremely low potential for conflict exists; or
- C. If a channelized turn lane is separated from the adjacent travel lanes by an island and the channelized turn lane is not controlled by a traffic control signal. Except as provided in Section 2B.09, STOP signs and YIELD signs shall not be installed on different approaches to the same un-signalized intersection if those approaches conflict with or oppose each other. Portable or part-time STOP or YIELD signs shall not be used except for emergency and temporary traffic control zone purposes.

A portable or part-time (folding) STOP sign that is manually placed into view and manually removed from view shall not be used during a power outage to control a signalized approach unless the maintaining agency establishes that the signal indication that will first be displayed to that approach upon restoration of power is a flashing red signal indication and that the portable STOP sign will be manually removed from view prior to stop-and-go operation of the traffic control signal.

The language contained above – shall not – does not allow for discretion and appears to be a ministerial directive not to place temporary traffic control devices when the power for the device fails, unless the

device can be properly programmed to be in accordance with MUTCD as above.

...signal indication that will first be displayed to that approach upon restoration of power is a flashing red signal indication and that the portable STOP sign will be manually removed from view prior to stop-and-go operation of the traffic control signal.

In addition to following the MUTCD, municipalities and local traffic authorities should use communications channels with the community on what the expectation is when a traffic sign is dark.

For more information on this topic, please contact your CIRMA Risk Management Consultant. Please visit our training and education program page at CIRMA.org for our current training schedule.