Build Your Crash Response Team

When a serious crash occurs, a community already possesses much of the information needed to begin understanding what happened. The challenge is that this information is often scattered across departments, reports, and individuals.

Police may know what happened during the crash. Engineering may have plans, traffic data, or information about how the street operates. Public works may know about maintenance conditions or recent changes. Planning may know about surrounding development, previous studies, or future projects. Transit staff may understand how people move through the location. Other city staff may have received complaints, service requests, or observations from people who use the street every day.

No single person has the complete picture, so the Crash Response Team brings that information together. Its job is simple: gather what the community knows about the crash and the place where it occurred.

The team does not need to determine fault, identify contributing factors, or recommend solutions. Those conversations happen during the Crash Analysis Studio. The Crash Response Team gives the Studio a shared place to begin.

What Is a Crash Response Team?

A Crash Response Team is a small group responsible for gathering what the community knows about a serious crash and the place where it occurred. The team brings that information together so everyone participating in the Crash Analysis Studio begins with the same understanding.

Keep the Team Small. Gather Information Quickly and Broadly.

A Crash Response Team does not need to be another large committee. In some communities, one person may coordinate the collection of information. In others, two or three staff members may share this responsibility. The team should be small enough to respond quickly, without waiting to assemble a room full of people.

The team's job is to gather what we know. Start with the information already available and begin while observations are still fresh. Do not delay because a police report is incomplete, a traffic count is several

years old, or another piece of information is unavailable. The team does not need to commission a new study or answer every question before the Crash Analysis Studio can begin.

Organize this work around three simple questions:

What Do We Know?

Gather existing information about the crash, the street, and the surrounding place. This could include the police report and crash diagram, site photographs, street plans, traffic or speed information, previous crash history, maintenance records, planned projects, previous studies, service requests, or knowledge held by staff.

The information available will be different in every community. The goal is not to assemble everything that could possibly be known. Bring together what we already know and make it available to the people who will participate in the Studio.

What Did We Observe?

Visit the crash location as soon as practical and document the place before conditions change. Reports, maps, photographs, and plans tell part of the story, but being at the location provides another perspective.

Look for conditions that may not be captured in existing records. Was there snow piled near the intersection? Were leaves, vegetation, or parked vehicles affecting visibility? Were streetlights working? Was construction underway? Were cones, barriers, temporary signs, or other traffic-control devices present? Was a sidewalk or travel lane closed? Was there standing water, debris, or damage?

Also observe how people are actually using the street. Where are people walking and crossing? Where are bicyclists riding? Where do transit passengers wait? How do drivers approach and move through the location? Are people using the street differently than the plans, signs, or pavement markings suggest?

Document what you see with photographs and notes. These are observations, not conclusions. The purpose is not to recreate the crash or determine whether a particular condition caused it. **Document the place before the place changes.**

What Don’t We Know?

Be clear about what is missing. The police investigation may not be complete. There may not be a recent traffic count, or it may be unclear whether a streetlight was functioning at the time of the crash.

Do not delay the Studio or fill these gaps with assumptions. Record what remains unknown so the Studio can distinguish between what is known, what has been observed, and what still needs to be learned.

There Is More Than One Way To Do This

Communities do not need identical Crash Response Teams or identical information-gathering systems. Our work with Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Denton, Texas, illustrates two different approaches to accomplishing the same task.

These cities organize the work differently, but they are solving the same problem: How do we bring together what our community knows so that people can learn from the crash?

Ann Arbor: Build on an Existing Review Process

Ann Arbor has developed a recurring multidisciplinary process for reviewing serious crashes. Police and transportation staff share information, and transportation staff have access to an extensive collection of digital information about the street. Depending on the location, this can include GIS information for signs, signals and streetlights, crash records, photographs, speed and volume data, and other transportation information, all of which are easy to access.

The city brings this information into a recurring crash review process. Ann Arbor demonstrates what this work can look like when a community has already developed a mature system for sharing information and reviewing crashes. A city does not, however, need Ann Arbor's technology, staffing, or data systems before it can begin.

Denton: Give Someone Responsibility for Gathering the Pieces

Denton takes a somewhat different approach. Following a serious crash, transportation staff can respond to the location and begin gathering information while the police investigation continues. A coordinator reaches across departments via email for information and supplements those records with observations from the site.

This allows the city to begin learning without waiting for every piece of information to become available. Denton demonstrates the value of giving someone responsibility for gathering the pieces and moving the process forward.