

Memorandum

*Making Conservation
a California Way of Life*

To: DEPUTY DIRECTORS
DIVISION CHIEFS

Date: June 30, 2021

From: RACHEL CARPENTER 
Chief Safety Officer

Subject: **ADOPT THE TERMS “CRASH,” “COLLISION,” AND “INCIDENT” AND DISCONTINUE THE TERM “ACCIDENT” WHEN REFERRING TO TRAFFIC CRASHES**

The Division of Safety Programs recommends that all California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) personnel officially adopt the terms “crash,” “collision,” and “incident” in lieu of the term “accident” when discussing traffic crashes. This deliberate change in terminology will support Caltrans’ safety initiatives and will align Caltrans with other state and federal entities, who have already adopted this change in support of greater accuracy and consistency.

In California, traffic crashes result in over 3,600 fatalities each year. Most traffic crashes have identifiable and preventable causes, including (but not limited to) excessive speed, drunk driving, and distracted driving. Caltrans has developed many safety policies, programs, and countermeasures to address these underlying causes and mitigate crashes that are often misconstrued as “accidental.” The use of more deliberate terminology will support the design of safety countermeasures to address the various factors that contribute to crashes, collisions, and incidents.

Many federal agencies, such as the Federal Highway Administration, the U.S Department of Transportation, and the National Highway Traffic Safety Association use the term “crash” or “collision.” The term “crash” is used in federal statutes and regulations (United States Code and the Code of Federal Regulations) and in federal programs such as the Fatality Analysis Reporting System. According to the most recent *American National Standard Manual on Classification of Motor Vehicle Traffic Crashes*, “while neither term, ‘accident’ nor ‘crash,’ adequately defines all incidents and collisions, the term ‘accident’ connotes an unpreventable event. Many crashes involve behaviors such as speeding,

aggressive driving, driver impairment, or distraction. All of these are preventable behaviors.”

Many State Departments of Transportation have also adopted this change in terminology. The Washington State Department of Transportation, for instance, maintains a Style Guide that establishes a preference for use of the terms “collision” or “crash” instead of “accident.” Within California, in January 2018 the California Highway Patrol approved the term “crash” for use in its Highway Patrol Manual, Crash Investigation Manual, and the CHP 555 Traffic Crash Report form. The changes to the Form 555 were recently implemented.

By adopting the terms “crash,” “collision,” and “incident” in lieu of “accident” in all its internal and external communications, Caltrans will be aligning with its federal and state partners as well as the CHP.

The Division of Safety Programs recommends this change go into effect immediately.

Caltrans Definitions:

Accident is an incident that happens unexpectedly and unintentionally or an incident that happens by chance and without deliberate cause.

Collision is an impact between objects, persons, animals, or other obstacles.

Crash is a violent collision between objects, typically of one vehicle to another or of an obstacle.

Incident is a distinct event, such as a crash, fire, or shooting.

For additional information, please contact the Division of Safety Programs by e-mail at <safety.programs@dot.ca.gov>.

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c: Toks Omishakin, Director
Michael Keever, Chief Deputy Director (acting)
Cory Binns, Deputy Director, Maintenance and Operations
Jeanie Ward-Waller, Deputy Director, Planning and Modal Programs
Deputy District Directors, Operations
Monica Kress-Wooster, Deputy Division Chief, Traffic Safety, Division of
Safety Programs