

**INFORMATION  
REGARDING THE USE  
OF EMERGENCY  
WARNING TAILLIGHT  
FLASHING UNITS**

**WHELEN**<sup>®</sup>ENGINEERING COMPANY INC.  
AUTOMOTIVE SALES DIVISION**IMPORTANT NOTICE ABOUT BRAKE LIGHT FLASHERS**

*Whelen* brake light flashers (UBF5150, SSF5150 and BL5150) manufactured prior to November, 1998, may not be totally compatible with the electrical system of *some* of the latest or future model vehicles.

Whelen has continually upgraded its tail light flashers to be compatible with all vehicles existing at the time the flasher was manufactured and sold. *Whelen* has developed diode and resistor kits that may be needed when using older-style flashers on 1999 vehicles. The latest series of *Whelen* tail light flashers have these devices built in. If you are installing any of these *older-style* flashers for the first time or moving them to newer vehicles, they may not be compatible. If you have *Whelen* brake light flashers with serial numbers *lower* than those listed below, you must purchase these kits for the brake and tail light system to work perfectly and without fault on newer vehicles.

	<u>UBF5150</u>	<u>SSF5150</u>	<u>BL5150</u>
Serial Number			
<u>Lower</u> Than:	17996	13993	0600

On all above, use **DIODE KIT SB540** (List Price: \$ 7.00) and **RESISTOR KIT SB550** (List Price \$ 5.00)

*Whelen Engineering* recommends the use of its new rear Hide-A-Way System, Model SRCV98CC, which is an economical way of placing independently powered and wired high intensity strobes into the rear tail light assemblies without any connections to the brake/tail/turn signals.

Other *Whelen*-manufactured flashers not used for brake light use (headlight, grille light, ambulance, etc.) do not require these devices, whatsoever. Due to possible significant electrical system changes by the car manufacturers in future years, we strongly suggest that *any* currently used brake light flashers, *regardless of manufacturer*, may not be reinstalled into such vehicles purchased in the future, or, contact the flasher manufacturer *prior* to any reuse of these flashers for possible upgrade information.

If you have any questions about *Whelen* flashers in your possession, please contact our sales or service department directly.

ROUTE 145, WINTHROP ROAD, CHESTER, CT, USA 06412-0684  
TELEPHONE: (860) 526-9504 FAX: (860) 526-4786  
WEBSITE: [www.whelen.com](http://www.whelen.com)

# American Police Beat



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## Sudden acceleration

Is your vehicle an accident waiting to happen?

by Mark Nichols

When Bob Young, crash expert for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, was called to the scene of an accident in Minneapolis involving a police vehicle, he was sure he knew what happened. The driver must have slammed the gas instead of the brakes.

That was his idea going in. But after a thorough investigation, Mr. Young has discovered a problem that could put thousands of police personnel at risk.

A device used to make a police vehicle's brake lights flash when the overhead lights are turned on may be causing vehicles to lurch forward

violently. He told his story to Anna Wilde Mathews of the *Wall Street Journal*, which printed an extensive front page story on the problem last month.

The incident Young was called to investigate took less than six seconds.

A police van was called to the Nicolet Mall in Minneapolis where two drunks had collapsed on the pavement. Officers approached the men as a police van pulled up with its lights flashing. As a crowd gathered to watch the arrest, Officer Tom Sawina, who was driving the 1997 Ford Econoline, called out to his fel-

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# Device may put officers at risk

Continued from page one

low officers that he would move the van closer so the two drunks could easily be put in the van. Sawina put his right foot on the brake and put the van into "drive".

The engine revved and the van jumped forward. Sawina jammed down on the brake but it was no use. The van careened into an office building after hitting two women and an infant. The infant and one woman died, while 10 others were injured. As in the case of most large accidents, federal authorities were contacted and Bob Young was on his way to Minneapolis.

When he arrived, Young expected to clear things up quickly and quietly. He showed State Patrol Sgt. Chuck Walerius a model he used in presentations, explaining how human error had to be the cause in this case.

Young told Sgt. Walerius, "The only way you're going to get wide-open throttle in that van is if you've got the gas pedal mashed to the floor." They hadn't even looked at the vehicle and Sgt. Walerius was

starting to think Young's attitude was a little condescending.

Young has investigated 63 cases of sudden acceleration in his 17 years with the NHTSA. Each time there was suspicion of mechanical malfunction but it always turned out to be human error when the case was closed. This case shouldn't be any different.

tioned.

Sgt. Walerius and Young sat in the van in question in a police garage. Without the police lights flashing, as they had been at the time of the accident, Young checked the shift-lock. It worked fine. Then he showed Sgt. Walerius what usually happened in these cases. Pressing the gas and brake at the same time, he

land, Young and a police mechanic were trying to figure out how the flashing red and blue lights could disable the shift lock. The mechanic pointed out a device he had just that morning installed in the cruiser. It was a small black plastic cube that made the brake lights flash when the police lights were on. It was wired to the same circuit that controls the shift lock.

He asked police officials in the Maryland garage why they were installing these devices, bought from after-market suppliers. They said it was because the brass liked the increased level of visibility the flashing brake lights provided. Incredulous, Young went back to Minneapolis to check the van from the accident again. They found the

after-market device which makes the brake lights flash, disconnected it, and the van's shift-lock worked fine. "If this hadn't been connected," Young told Sgt. Walerius, "We wouldn't be having this conversation."

Ford includes a warning for all police vehicles which says the addition of after-market devices may cause vehicle malfunction, but the amount of these devices Young saw in the course of his investigation made him think the warnings weren't working. He asked the NHTSA to send out warnings to 17,000 police departments around the country by special wire to warn police officers about the problem.

But the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has no authority to require police departments to remove the devices and Mr. Young believes there may be huge risks with a failure to check these problems. Now he spends sleepless nights wondering where and when the next deadly accident will take place.

Young has even angrily confronted the manufacturers of these devices at a recent conference of Ford Dealers. He tucked his name tag into his shirt so people would talk to him freely. He was encouraged to find that one company, Whelen Engineering Co., had stopped selling the devices which make brake lights flash. But only a few steps away, SoundOff Inc. was still selling the tiny black boxes, and there were plenty of interested customers.

*If you have questions about shift-lock problems in your cruiser, there are several places to call for information. The Department of Transportation hotline numbers are 888-327-4236 or 800-424-9393. Or you can e-mail Bob Young directly at [ryoung@NHTSA.dot.gov](mailto:ryoung@NHTSA.dot.gov)*

**"I had a squad car I could get into gear without stepping on the brake," the state trooper informed Mr. Young. The trooper went on to say that when his police lights were flashing, the shift lock device wouldn't work.**

And then Mr. Young checked the shift-lock. Lawsuits alleging sudden acceleration in the 1980's forced automakers to install a device that would force drivers to step on the brake before shifting into drive. If a shift-lock is working properly, a driver can't get the car in gear without pressing the brake firmly. Young wondered if the shift-lock in the van from the accident had malfunctioned.

put the Ford in gear and it lurched forward. Case closed. Young went back to his office and wrote up a meticulous report, which cleared Ford and laid the blame for the accident at the feet of Officer Sawina. A couple of months later Bob Young was fighting the flu when he gave a presentation to investigators and police officers about sudden acceleration and the crash at the Nicolet Mall. He had just about finished when a hand shot up in the back.

"I had a squad car I could get into gear without stepping on the brake," the state trooper informed Mr. Young. The trooper went on to say that when his police lights were flashing, the shift lock device wouldn't work. Young politely explained that the lights would have no impact on the shift-lock because they would be wired to different circuits. "Mine did it, that's all I know," the Trooper said.

Young's mind raced back to the police garage in Minneapolis where he had conducted the tests. He had the police lights off when he checked for trouble. Ever the investigator, Young suggested that the meeting move outside where this lights/shift-lock question could be tested on the various police cars there. Sgt. Walerius got into his Crown Vic, leaving the door open, turned the lights on, dropped the vehicle into gear and almost totaled the cruiser in front of him.

Now engines were revving and police cars were jumping into gear all over the parking lot. "Hey, mine does it, too," officers called out. Young, who has a reputation for always getting it right, knew his report was wrong. He tested a small fleet of vehicles at Ford dealership and they all worked fine. But that's because they weren't equipped with police lights.

At a police department in Mary-

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