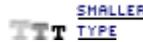




May 23, 2003

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Crown Vic rear crash kills Missouri trooper

Bob Golfen

The Arizona Republic
May. 23, 2003 12:00 AM

A Ford Crown Victoria patrol car equipped with a fuel-tank shield system designed to prevent rear-impact fires burst into flames Thursday morning after a crash, killing a Missouri state trooper.

Trooper Michael Newton, 25, burned to death in the fire about 7 a.m. after his 2003 patrol car was rear-ended at an estimated 65 mph by a 1-ton truck towing a trailer, according to Cpl. Doug Alexander, a Missouri State Police spokesman.

Newton is the 15th police officer nationwide to be killed after Crown Victoria Police Interceptors burst into flames after being hit in the rear. Three officers have been killed in Arizona, and Phoenix police Officer Jason Schechterle suffered disfiguring and disabling burns in a March 2001 patrol car fire.

Safety advocates and public officials have called on Ford to address the problem, in which a vertical fuel tank located between the trunk wall and rear axle has been blamed as vulnerable to punctures in crashes.

Arizona became the center of the controversy last year when then-Attorney General Janet Napolitano and Ford officials organized a task force to study solutions to the fuel-tank problem. The task force agreed on a system of shields designed by Ford to help prevent crash-related punctures. The shields are being installed on police cruisers around the country.

Newton's car, a 2003 model, came equipped with the shield system, installed at the Ford factory during assembly.

Newton had stopped another car for a traffic violation and was parked on the shoulder of Interstate 70 near Odessa when his car was hit, Alexander said.

The driver of the car that had been pulled over was rescued from the passenger seat of the patrol car by passers-by, Alexander said, but they were unable to rescue Newton. The rescued man, who was not identified, suffered third-degree burns on his lower extremities, and overall burns on 40 percent of his body. He was reported in serious condition.

The driver of the truck was slightly injured in the crash.

Phoenix attorney Pat McGroder, who has represented the families and victims of the fires and who spearheaded an effort to install safety bladders and fire-suppression technology in Crown Victoria patrol cars, said Newton's death shows that Ford's shield system is a failure.

"The issue remains the same, that these vehicles are not crashworthy for law-enforcement usage," McGroder said.

Arizona Department of Public Safety spokesman Steve Volden said the

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shields are being installed in DPS cars, although he noted that fuel-fed fires might be impossible to eliminate altogether.

"You hit any car under the right circumstances at 65 mph, it's going to rupture the tank," Volden said. "That's what people don't understand."

In April, a DPS officer escaped injury when his patrol car was rear-ended on the northbound offramp of Interstate 17 at Camelback Road and shoved into the back of a truck. Struck by a compact car, it did not spill fuel or burst into flames.

DPS spokesman Frank Valenzuela said at the time that DPS technicians determined the crash was not severe enough to impact the fuel tank, so the shields were not a factor.

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