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Fiery crash kills Chandler officer

Death renews concerns about Crown Victoria cruisers

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A fiery collision took the life of a Chandler police officer Wednesday, heightening concern about the safety of a popular police cruiser used throughout the Valley.



Robert Nielsen

Officer Robert Nielsen, 25, was responding to a call when his Ford Crown Victoria was struck on Chandler Boulevard. He is the third Arizona officer to die in a crash involving the cruiser.

"They deal with the hardest part of life, criminals, et cetera, and they say that any day they can come home is a good day," said Carl Bender, a former member of the Chandler Police Board. "Today is not a good day."

Nielsen was traveling west on Chandler Boulevard when a woman traveling east in a Mitsubishi began to turn left in front of him, said Officer Frank Valenzuela, a spokesman for the state Department of Public Safety.

"The patrol officer attempted evasive action, moved over one lane. She struck the driver's side of the patrol car," he said. The police cruiser spun counterclockwise and struck a traffic pole in the rear passenger area of the car.

"The vehicle caught fire, and then the fire quickly spread. It's not a complete explosion," Valenzuela said.

Whitney Palmer, 15, witnessed the crash at Chandler Boulevard and Pennington Drive.

"It was just a humongous ball of fire," she said. A worker from a nearby carwash came running out with a fire extinguisher to help. "It was incredible smoke and flames," Palmer said.

Right after the crash, Palmer heard the horn blaring and the sound of ammunition popping.

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"We heard gunshots, five or six gunshots going off," she said.

The 72-year-old driver of the Mitsubishi, whose name was not released, was transported with chest injuries to Scottsdale Healthcare Osborn.

Valenzuela said no citations had been issued yet, but the accident remains under investigation.

As the smashed, charred hull of the police cruiser was covered with a tarp to conceal the officer's body, officials revisited recent safety concerns about Crown Victorias.

Arizona Attorney General Janet Napolitano, who met with Ford officials just this week on the issue, said the latest crash "adds more urgency to the work we have already been doing."

"We are obviously going to treat this as a top issue until we get some action," she said.

The concerns involve its fuel-tank design, blamed in lawsuits for causing cars to burst into flame when they are struck from behind at high speed because of the positioning of the tank.

Valenzuela said Wednesday's crash was a little different.

"It's not a rear-end collision; it's a side-impact collision to the rear of the car," he said.

Henry Loveland, 22, heard the commotion from his nearby home and went to the scene. "The flames were as tall as the light posts," he said. "You could tell anybody that was in the car was dead."

Martin Nagel, 39, of Chandler, was returning from lunch when he saw intense black smoke.

"The front of the car was the only part of it that wasn't a black, incinerated shell," Nagel said. "You could tell the police officers were a little shaken up, too."

Across the Valley, police departments are modifying their Crown Victorias as recommended by Ford.

Nielsen was the third Arizona officer to die in a fiery crash involving the popular police cruiser. A fourth lawman, Phoenix police Officer Jason Schechterle, was critically burned on March 26, 2001, but survived. Nielsen also is the second Chandler officer to die in the line of duty. Officer James Snedigar was gunned down three years ago.

Schechterle called the continuing Crown Victoria problem "ridiculous."

"How could this have possibly happened again in Arizona? Four times in the past four years," he said.

Schechterle's wife, Suzie, was among those who went Wednesday evening to present the widow a check from the 100 Club, a support group for families of fallen officers.

"Suzie and I have no idea what they're going through, and we will do anything we can to support them," Jason said. "We are very sorry to each member of the family and to the Chandler Police Department."

Nielsen, a two-year veteran of the Chandler police force, is survived by his wife, Ann Marie, and parents, Berdis and Teresa, all of Chandler.

Napolitano said that despite the tragic accidents, Ford controls 85 percent of the market.

"This is the car of choice. The problem is it has this tendency to catch fire in certain situations. They need to fix that," she said.

Kathe Cochrane, special-projects administrator for the state Department of Administration, said safety is a factor in determining what cruisers to buy, but other factors such as maintenance also come into play. Some municipal police departments, including Chandler, buy their cruisers through contracts that the state negotiates.

"We will be working with fleet managers to determine if there are alternatives to the Crown Victoria (under the state's contract)," Cochrane said.

Last month, Ford Motor Co. settled lawsuits filed by the families of two Arizona law enforcement officers who were burned alive when their cruisers were struck from behind. Pat McGroder, a Phoenix lawyer representing both families, said DPS Officers Juan Cruz and Floyd "Skip" Fink both would have survived the crashes if their cruisers had not burst into flames.

"I've been trying to get people to listen to me for a long time," McGroder said. "We need to ensure that these vehicles are safe for law enforcement usage. We continue to hear about these tragedies. This is four in Arizona. This is not a coincidence."

McGroder said protection of the fuel tanks in the Crown Victorias is "woefully lacking." Because police vehicles are constantly in harm's way, they need to be designed so officers feel safe inside them, he said.

"Something needs to be done to protect officers from otherwise survivable crashes," he said. "We need to protect them from burning alive."

Christina Leonard and Judi Villa contributed to this article. Reach the reporter at patricia.biggs@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-7961.

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