

Proposed bill would allow discretion in use of sirens

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AUGUSTA — Legislation that would allow drivers of emergency vehicles to exercise their discretion in the use of sirens was unopposed Monday during a hearing before the Transportation Committee.

Under existing statute, traffic on Maine highways must yield the right of way to emergency vehicles approaching from either direction if they are using their emergency lights and sirens.

Committee members were told this means sirens must be used constantly in emergency responses to assure the right of way for such vehicles. This also allows them to take advantage of exemptions from the requirements of some motor vehicle laws granted to emergency vehicles.

But Kevin K. McGinnis, director of Maine Emergency Medical Services, said the existing law "defies common sense" and because it is not strictly adhered to by all emergency vehicle operators "it makes criminals" of emergency vehicle drivers who utilize up-to-date emergency driving techniques.

McGinnis told the committee that sirens "can be dangerous at worst and irritating at best" and virtually useless for emergency vehicles in a variety of circumstances. "They have little use on the turnpike and on most streets and roads in the middle of the night."

But they do have a useful purpose, he testified, when used to alert others on the highway that an emergency vehicle seeks the right of way or to take advantage of the legal exemptions in statute.