

Safety Service Patrol Pooled Fund Study October 2024

Important Considerations for Safety Service Patrol Sponsorships

Background

Safety Service Patrol Programs

The arrival of a safety service patrol (SSP) is a welcome sight to motorists who find themselves stranded, or otherwise in need of assistance, when traveling some of the Nation's busiest roadways. In most cases, an SSP operator can provide basic roadside assistance, such as a tire change, a small bit of gas, or a jump start, to help travelers on their way. Providing motorist assistance not only earns goodwill from the traveling public, it also serves the critical function of keeping the roadways safer and less congested.

At least forty states have SSPs and in some cases their missions have expanded significantly from their original focus on motorist assistance. Today's SSPs are often first on the scene of an incident, and many provide critical services such as: emergency traffic management, emergency medical assistance, debris and spill clean-ups, and serving as the central point of contact for other responders and traffic management centers (TMCs). SSP programs are a proven solution for increasing reliability along a corridor by resolving incidents quickly and safely, minimizing the overall impact of each incident, and helping to maintain safe and efficient traffic operations. For most people, the operator providing needed roadside assistance is, literally, the face of the SSP program, and, potentially, an excellent ambassador for the SSP's governing agency.

SSP Funding and Sponsorship

For many programs at the State and local level, securing funding can be an ongoing challenge. In response, agencies may adopt the strategy of establishing a public-private partnership, or in the case of an SSP, a sponsorship, where a private company provides financial support in exchange for the right to add their branding and logos to SSP assets. Sponsor branding is often used on trucks and operator uniforms, although, in some cases,

sponsors are also allowed to place signs along the roadway, or to create branded material to hand out to the public.

While any company could benefit from association with an SSP, automobile insurance companies – such as State Farm, Geico, and Mapfre – benefit directly by aligning their brand with an organization that specializes in roadside safety and driver assistance. Many insurance companies work to build a brand image of friendly and helpful service for their customers in times of need. An SSP operator, perhaps with a logo on their uniform from a sponsoring company, in an SSP truck, with the sponsor’s logo perhaps as conspicuous as the public agency’s own, providing emergency services in a professional, courteous, and timely manner is a great advertisement for the sponsor – one that they could not otherwise buy.

Sponsorships may allow SSPs to maintain or increase their levels of service, but they are not without drawbacks. In general, program managers report that SSP programs are not benefiting sufficiently from these sponsor relationships.

Considerations regarding SSP Sponsorships

SSP program managers have identified three significant concerns related to sponsorships:

- Sponsorship can dilute the identity of SSP programs in the public eye to where the program is perceived as an operation of the sponsoring agency, instead of a public service.
- SSP decisionmakers and program managers may have little to no input on the terms of sponsorship agreements.
- Sponsorships can be a net financial loss for the SSP program.

Consideration #1: Sponsorship can dilute the identity of SSP programs in the public eye to where the program is perceived as an operation of the sponsoring agency, instead of a public service.

SSPs are public services, and it’s important that the public see them as programs run by DOTs or other State agencies. If the public believes it is the sponsor providing these services and not a public agency, there may be reduced public support for funding the program, ultimately undermining the program’s sustainability.

Sponsors might take credit for program successes. A sponsor may even list program highlights on their websites as if the accomplishments are the result of the private company's own efforts.

Branding requirements from sponsorship agreements that cause confusion may impact the ability of the SSP operator to perform effectively. Immediate recognition of SSP operators is important in emergency situations, where roles and responsibilities must be clear to prevent confusion and ensure efficient response. SSP operators need to be recognizable as official representatives of the transportation agency to help communicate their authority to motorists and coordinate with first responders.

Public confusion is understandable because of the extensive branding sponsorships can require. In one case, sponsor branding covered 70 percent of the body of the SSP truck. In another, public comment cards branded with the sponsorship logo were required to be given to the public after each incident. The cards were even directly returned to the sponsoring organization, rather than the SSP to monitor operator performance.

Programs with the same sponsor often adopt consistent branding across multiple States, leading to cumulative benefits for the sponsor in terms of increased recognition nationwide, while the distinct identities of the SSPs are subsumed.

The association of a sponsor with an SSP service can persist for years even after sponsorship terminates, leaving SSP programs struggling to reestablish their identities and distance themselves from the former sponsor.

Consideration #2: SSP decisionmakers and program managers may have little to no input on the terms of sponsorship agreements.

Potential sponsors may approach senior decisionmakers at public transportation agencies with offers of financial support in return for branding rights on SSP assets. In these cases, the decisionmakers may enter into agreements that have not been fully vetted or understood, without discussion with SSP program management staff.

Sponsorships are not awarded through requests for proposals (RFPs) or other competitive contracting mechanisms and are often treated as donations – similar to “Adopt a Highway” campaigns – allowing agencies and sponsors to broker deals without a competitive process. Since sponsorships are non-competitive, the full value of the public relations exposure received by the sponsor is not clearly established. Traditional contracting mechanisms give DOTs more bargaining power and the ability to push back on requests.

Some program managers noted that the “donation” model feels inappropriate in general, as these transactions are more-or-less a company purchasing advertising space on SSP vehicles.

Since SSP program representatives are often excluded from the process of establishing sponsorships, and do not have a contract in place as a basis for negotiation, SSP program managers report having difficulty pushing back on sponsor requests – even if the request may be inappropriate. Examples include:

- SSP operators handing out branded blankets and stuffed animals at an incident
- Extensive branding on vehicles and lack of transportation agency insignia
- Comment and feedback cards distributed to the public after a response and sent to the sponsor company instead of the SSP’s or its governing agency

A vehicle branded with a private automobile insurance company’s logo can lead the public to assume the response is not a free public service. Help may be declined either because there is a concern that the motorist will be charged for the service or because the motorist does not have coverage with the sponsoring insurance company. The confusion may be exacerbated by the existence of roadside assistance services provided by some insurance companies for their customers.

Consideration #3: Sponsorships can be a net financial loss for the SSP program.

Multiple SSP program managers reported a net loss from their sponsorship agreements.

SSP program managers report the typical sponsorship only supports about one to five percent of the program’s total cost. This makes it easy for SSP program costs related to sponsorships to exceed the benefits.

In some cases, SSP program managers report that sponsorship funding does not go directly into the SSP budget, but rather into a general transportation agency fund. In this case, the SSP program will receive no benefit from the sponsorship but will still experience the downsides, including incurring any related costs.

The cost of adding branding to SSP uniforms and trucks is often borne by the SSP. When considering the cost of adding logos and branding to uniforms and retroreflective attire, the cost of complying with sponsorship branding can be considerable. For SSP programs with larger fleets, the cost of painting SSP vehicles to add sponsor logos and branding can exceed the funds received from the sponsor – resulting in a net financial loss.

When a sponsorship ends, and it is appropriate to remove any sponsor branding from uniforms and trucks, the SSP program is required to pay the costs to do that. In many cases the SSP programs need to pay twice: to add the branding and to remove it. Some SSP program managers note that restoring uniforms and trucks after removing sponsor logos, etc. is practically impossible and often leaves “ghost” imprints where branding was removed.

SSP program managers advise that programs considering sponsorship secure agreements where the cost of branding SSP assets at the start of a sponsorship agreement and restoring them at the end is covered by the sponsoring organization.

Conclusion

It is crucial that State agencies and program facilitators be able to negotiate sponsorship agreements that allow SSP programs to maintain their identity, adequately fulfill their functions, and ensure that the benefits they receive from sponsorships are commensurate with the contributions sponsors make. By equipping SSP program managers with the necessary resources and information, the distribution of power in these relationships can be made more balanced.

The three concerns described in this paper need to be addressed to provide balance in the public-private partnership between SSPs and their sponsors. Potential approaches to addressing these concerns include development of alternative business models, consolidation of best practices in successful sponsorships, and documentation of lessons learned from challenges in sponsorship relations. Alternatively, funding models that allow SSPs to operate effectively without financial support provided through sponsorship is another area for investigation.