

One Light, Two Lights, Red Light, Blue Light

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Legislation sponsored by the State Coalition of Probation Organizations will allow probation peace officers to display a blue warning light on authorized emergency vehicles. Senate Bill 587 (D-Atkins) would amend Vehicle Code section 25258(b) to give probation officers the same authority as most other peace officers to add a steady or flashing blue warning light to department vehicles.

Current law already provides that any law enforcement agency vehicle driven by a peace officer – including probation peace officers – is an “authorized emergency vehicle”. (Veh. Code § 165.) All authorized emergency vehicles in California are permitted to display a flashing white light designed to control traffic signals, and are exempt from traffic laws when using a siren and a red light enroute to an emergency. (Veh. Code §§ 21055, 25258(a).) Those same vehicles can display red, white and amber lights, but not all can display blue:

- **Red:** all emergency vehicles *must* display at least one steady red light visible at least 1,000 feet to the front and *may* display additional flashing, steady or revolving red lights to the front, sides or rear (Veh. Code § 25252)
- **White:** authorized emergency vehicles may display “not more than two” flashing white warning lights mounted on the roof and inside, as well as “wig-wag” headlights (Veh. Code §§ 25259(c), 25252.5)
- **Amber:** emergency vehicles may display flashing amber warning lights to the front, sides or rear (Veh. Code § 25259(a))
- **Blue:** emergency vehicles operated by most 830-series peace officers in California, *except for those operated by probation officers*, may display a flashing or steady blue warning light (Veh. Code § 25258(b))

Blue warning lights on emergency vehicles have been determined in studies by the Society of Automotive Engineers and others to be more visible at night and in sunlight than red, white or amber lights. The blue lights appear to motorists to be closer, thus increasing the warning time to drivers approaching an emergency vehicle. Unlike red lights, blue lights have not been shown to cause a “moth effect” that draws drivers toward, rather than warns them away from, the lights.

With probation officers now responsible for supervising more high-risk offenders and more likely to operate with other agencies, blue lights have become essential to officer safety. The “rendering of mutual aid to any other law enforcement

agency" is one of the duties of probation officers delineated in the Penal Code. (Pen. Code § 830.5(a)(5)(A). Probation peace officers who use blue warning lights will be more visible to other peace officers as well as to the public at large.

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