

Use of Colored and Flashing Lights on Motor Vehicles

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Issue

Summarize Connecticut's restrictions on the use of colored and flashing lights on motor vehicles. This report updates OLR Report [2019-R-0238](#).

Summary

State law restricts the color of lights that may be displayed on motor vehicles and equipment ("vehicles") and generally prohibits the use of flashing lights on vehicles, except under certain circumstances (e.g., to signal a turn or to indicate a disabled vehicle) ([CGS § 14-96p](#)).

But the law allows specific types of vehicles (e.g., ambulances or wreckers) or vehicles driven by specified individuals (e.g., volunteer firefighters or emergency medical technicians) to have or use flashing lights (including rotating lights) or colored lights, such as blue or green lights ([CGS § 14-96q](#)). Below we identify the vehicles that are eligible for colored or flashing lights, and the individuals authorized to issue the applicable permit or otherwise grant authorization.

In most instances, authorization for the use of colored or flashing lights is granted through a permit. Permits may be issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) or another specified individual (e.g., a volunteer fire department's chief executive officer (CEO)), depending on the type of vehicle. In certain circumstances, permission to use colored or flashing lights is granted by virtue of a vehicle's registration (e.g., wreckers) or by the authorization of another government official (e.g., the Department of Transportation (DOT) commissioner).

By law, the unauthorized use of colored or flashing lights is an infraction, punishable by a \$50 fine and \$42 in surcharges (see [Connecticut Infractions Schedule](#)). An infraction is not a crime; violators can pay the fine by mail without making a court appearance.

Use of Colored and Flashing Lights

General Prohibition

State law generally prohibits a person from displaying colored lights on a vehicle, unless the lights are white, yellow, amber, or red. It further (1) restricts the color of lights that may be visible from the front of a vehicle to white, yellow, or amber and (2) specifically prohibits the display of any red light that is visible from directly in front center of the vehicle ([CGS § 14-96p](#)).

The law also generally prohibits flashing lights on vehicles, except when used:

1. as authorized under [CGS § 14-96q](#), as amended by [PA 23-135](#), § 40 (see Table 1 below);
2. on school buses (a) on the top rear of the bus (white lights) or (b) while receiving or discharging students (red and yellow lights);
3. to signal a turn;
4. to indicate a disabled vehicle that is stopped in or close to a hazardous location on a highway;
5. to indicate a vehicle that is unable, due to a highway's grade, to maintain the 40 mph minimum speed on a limited access divided highway;
6. to indicate a vehicle operating at a speed that is slow enough to obstruct or endanger following traffic;
7. while discharging students from a student transportation vehicle accommodating 15 or fewer students with disabilities; or
8. by a frozen dessert truck (red lights) ([CGS § 14-96p](#)).

Permits

State law allows for additional uses of colored and flashing lights by specified individuals or on specific types of vehicles with proper authorization ([CGS § 14-96q](#)). Authorization is typically granted through the issuance of a permit by the DMV commissioner or another specified individual, but in some cases may be granted by virtue of a vehicle's registration or by another government official (e.g., DOT commissioner or local chief law enforcement officer).

The DMV commissioner and other specified individuals have the authority to issue the permits, at their discretion, as allowed under the law. A permit is not required for vehicles that are (1) equipped with lights as authorized by law and (2) owned or leased by and registered to the federal government, or any state or local government. An annual permit fee of \$20 applies to DMV-issued permits.

Permits issued by individuals other than the DMV commissioner must be issued on a DMV-prescribed form. In most instances, individuals other than the DMV commissioner who are authorized to issue permits or grant permission to use colored or flashing lights must keep a record of authorized vehicles, including the vehicles' registration numbers.

Table 1 lists the vehicles that are eligible for colored or flashing lights and the individuals authorized to issue each type of permit. Generally, those eligible for a permit for colored lights are also eligible for a permit for flashing lights of that color. However, only police officers or DMV inspectors operating state or local police vehicles may use steady red or blue lights visible externally from the front of the vehicle. Other vehicles that are eligible to use red or blue lights may use only flashing red or blue lights ([CGS § 14-96q\(k\)](#)). Additionally, [PA 23-135](#), § 40, eliminated the authorization for steady green lights on vehicles operated by an active member of a volunteer ambulance association or company.

Table 1: Colored or Flashing Light Eligibility and Permit Issuance

Light Color	Eligible Vehicles or Equipment	Permit or Authorization Granted by
<p>Blue*, red*, yellow, or white</p> <p><i>(Or, for ambulances, other colors specified by federal regulations)</i></p> <p>(CGS § 14-96q(h))</p>	<p>Emergency vehicles, as defined in CGS § 14-283, which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ambulances or vehicles operated by an emergency medical service (EMS) organization responding to an emergency call fire trucks or other vehicles used by a fire department or officer of one responding to a fire or emergency call state or local police cars driven by a police officer or motor vehicle inspector responding to an emergency call or pursuing suspects Department of Correction (DOC) vehicles driven by DOC officers in the course of their employment and while responding to an emergency call Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) vehicles driven by DEEP employees in the course of their employment and while responding to a fire or emergency call 	DMV commissioner

Table 1 (continued)

<p>Blue* (CGS § 14-96q(c)), as amended by PA 23-135, § 40)</p>	<p>Vehicles operated by active members of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • volunteer fire departments • organized civil preparedness auxiliary fire companies • volunteer ambulance associations or companies 	<p>Department's, company's, or association's CEO</p>
<p>Vehicle must be on the way to or at the scene of a fire or other emergency requiring the member's services</p>		
<p>Green** (CGS § 14-96q(d) & (i)), as amended by PA 23-135, § 40)</p>	<p>Vehicles that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintenance vehicles owned and operated by DOT • operated by an active member of a volunteer ambulance association or company, while on the way to the scene of an emergency requiring the member's services 	<p>Association's or company's CEO; DOT vehicles do not require a permit</p>
<p>Red* (CGS § 14-96q(e)), as amended by PA 23-135, § 40)</p>	<p>Vehicles or equipment used by the following individuals (and their deputies and assistants, under certain conditions):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paid fire chiefs • volunteer fire chiefs • EMS organization CEOs • local fire marshals • directors of emergency management 	<p>DMV commissioner</p>
<p>Stationary vehicles used as warning signals during traffic directing operations by (1) fire police members at the scene of a fire or emergency or (2) appointed or elected constables</p>		
<p>Yellow or amber (CGS § 14-96q(f) & (i))</p>	<p>Vehicles that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eligible for a permit for red lights (see above) • used by the state, a municipality, a state bridge or parkway authority, or a public service company (e.g., electric, gas, and telephone companies, see CGS § 16-1(3)) in the maintenance of public highways, bridges, and certain facilities (i.e., a "maintenance vehicle," see CGS § 14-1(52)) • transporting or escorting an oversize or overweight vehicle or load that is operating under a DOT-issued permit • registered wreckers • operated by rural mail service carriers • used by DOT-authorized construction inspectors while they are performing inspections on the state's behalf 	<p>DMV commissioner, except that an additional permit is not necessary for eligible wreckers, mail carriers, construction inspectors, and vehicles registered out-of-state that are transporting or escorting oversize or overweight vehicles under a DOT permit (CGS § 14-96q(a))</p>

Table 1 (continued)

White (CGS § 14-96q(g))	Vehicles or equipment eligible for a permit for red lights (except for stationary vehicles used as a warning signal) Flashing white head lamps may be used on vehicles operated by a volunteer fire department member or emergency medical technician on the way to an emergency only (1) within the municipality that has granted the authorization or (2) from a personal residence or place of employment, if located in an adjoining municipality	DMV commissioner, except for the use of flashing white headlamps, which instead requires written authorization from a municipality's chief law enforcement officer
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*Under [CGS § 14-96q\(k\)](#), only police officers or DMV inspectors operating state or local police vehicles may use steady red or blue lights. All other eligible vehicles may use only flashing red or blue lights.

** Under [PA 23-135](#), § 40, vehicles operated by an active member of a volunteer ambulance association or company may no longer use steady green lights. They may use flashing green or flashing blue.

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