

# Police say burning Tesla battery prevented them from saving driver in fatal crash

Story by Karen Garcia

A driver in Torrance is dead after police say they were unable to save the person from their Tesla because of its burning lithium-ion battery.

Torrance police responded to a single-vehicle collision involving a Tesla at the intersection of Madrona Avenue and Plaza Del Amo Tuesday at about 10:15 p.m., according to a department news release.

A 2025 Tesla Model Y was southbound on Madrona Avenue when, for unknown reasons, the electric car swerved to the right, collided with a traffic pole and caught fire with the driver trapped inside, authorities said.

Officers tried to get into the vehicle to save the driver, but "due to the intensity of the flames and heat, they were unable to rescue the occupant," the department said.

The fight to put out the fire was then further complicated by "challenges associated with the vehicle's lithium-ion batteries," officials said.

The driver, and only occupant, was pronounced dead at the scene.

The incident is the latest example of the safety risks emergency crews can face when responding to incidents that involve high-voltage lithium-ion batteries that power electric vehicles, according to a National Transportation Safety Board report published in 2020.

# What risks do lithium-ion batteries pose for first responders?

Depending on the severity of the crash, an electric vehicle's high-voltage, lithium-ion battery could be at risk of being damaged, catching fire and even giving anyone who touches the vehicle an electric shock.

According to the study, when a lithium-ion battery is damaged, there is a risk of thermal runaway — when temperatures and pressures in damaged battery cells increase uncontrollably and the battery can end up venting and igniting toxic gases and exploding.

There's also the risk of electric shocks because the vehicles rely on much more electric power than the body can withstand.

"If a crash damages the electrical isolation system, a person who touches the vehicle (or an exposed connector)," can be shocked and suffer serious injury or death, the report stated. If there is leftover energy in the battery and the battery is damaged, that can also provide a shock or reignite a fire.

As part of their study, the National Transportation Safety Board reviewed three electric vehicle crashes that resulted in fires and one non-crash fire involving an internal battery failure and analyzed the risks for emergency responders. Three of the incidents occurred in California — Lake Forest, Mountain View and Hollywood.

In the Lake Forest crash, a 2016 Tesla Model X reignited three times (twice where it had crashed and once at the tow yard) even though first responders had poured water on it and suppressed the fire.

## Are there protocols in place for these risks?

Yes.

In 2011, the National Transportation Safety Board began working with the National Fire Protection Assn. to assist first responders (such as firefighters) and second

responders (such as tow operators) in handling lithium-ion batteries after a crash. The partnership included electric and hybrid vehicle manufacturers and called on the group to develop post-crash protocols for dealing with vehicles powered by lithium-ion batteries, the report stated.

In 2015, the National Fire Protection Assn. began publishing emergency field guides for alternative fuel vehicles as part of its safety training program. The association has 70 vehicle manufacturer guides on its website.

The basic guidelines for first responders include:

- Stabilize the vehicle by turning it off and disconnecting the 12-volt battery.
- Check for any exposed high-voltage components or cables that are visually present.
- Save any vehicle occupants who are stuck inside.
- For vehicle fires, use water or standard agents.
- Consult a manufacturer's guide or contact the manufacturer for further safety instructions.

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