



# Traffic Services Section Michigan State Police Field Update #32

Providing Traffic Related Information and Services to Michigan Law Enforcement

Section Phone (517) 336-6171

[www.michigan.gov/msp-traffic](http://www.michigan.gov/msp-traffic)  
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Fax (517) 336-6259

## Power Loss at a Signalized Intersection (Dark Signal)

The Traffic Services Section continues to receive questions regarding the right-of-way at intersections where a traffic signal has lost power. When a signal loses power, **the intersection becomes uncontrolled** and reverts back to the basic right-of-way requirements found in [MCL 257.649](#)(1) and (2). It does **not** become a four-way stop, as is frequently reported in the media.

A number of factors must be taken into account when determining the appropriate course of action in response to the loss of power at a signalized intersection. The Michigan Department of Transportation has issued a [memorandum](#) for response to power outages involving traffic signals on state trunkline highways, which accounts for a variety of factors that can influence if, when, and how temporary traffic control devices may be posted. While the memorandum is not binding on county road commissions or municipal road authorities, many have adopted a similar position. Check with your local road authority for their policy prior to the occurrence of an event.

The Michigan Department of State Police has adopted Official Order 49, [Enclosure \(9\)](#), to provide guidance to department members when responding to the loss of power at an intersection. Contact Sgt. Lance Cook, [Vehicle Code Unit](#), for additional information.

## Progressive Ideas and the Future of Traffic Control

As outlined above, the most prudent course of action often is to leave an intersection uncontrolled. While counterintuitive to the average driver, there is increasing evidence that a less regulated driving environment makes drivers more attentive to the driving task and to other road users in that driving environment. This also eliminates the false sense of security created by some signs, causing pedestrians and bicyclists to pay more attention as well. Several towns across Europe, particularly in The Netherlands and Germany, have [experimented](#) with removing nearly all traffic control devices in order to increase traffic [safety](#) and improve traffic flow. Results to date have generally been positive.

A number of communities in Michigan are also beginning to reexamine their use of traffic control devices, many of which have been in place for decades. The city of [Livonia](#), for example, has begun a systematic process of removing existing signs and signals that do not meet the warrants of the Michigan Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. Despite the fact that the sole intended purpose of stop signs and traffic signals is to assign right-of-way, similar devices in many communities were erected under the old paradigm of using stop signs, signal timing, and signal progression to attempt to control vehicle speeds in neighborhoods.

Although not warranted at the time of their installation, such traffic control devices were frequently placed due to public misperception and resultant political pressure. Decades of [research](#) have shown that unwarranted signs and signals often have unintended consequences and create an opposite effect on driver behavior of that intended. Drivers generally attempt to "make up for lost time" by rolling through unwarranted stop signs and driving faster in between. Drivers also tend to accelerate for improperly progressed yellow signals to avoid being trapped by a subsequent series of red signals. In addition to creating a more dangerous driving environment, these unwarranted traffic control devices increase fuel consumption, air pollution, and noise pollution through more frequent braking and acceleration. Traffic signals actually tend to increase the number of serious traffic crashes at intersections.

Because traffic safety is often counterintuitive, the biggest hurdle to effective traffic management and a safer driving environment continues to be interference by well-meaning but misinformed citizen groups and politicians. Education of these parties is the key to allowing the traffic engineer to maximize traffic safety and reduce traffic crashes.

[Alcohol Enforcement Unit](#)  
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(517) 336-6338  
(517) 336-6121  
(517) 336-6611  
(517) 336-6651

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(517) 336-6579  
(517) 336-6685  
(517) 336-6171  
(517) 336-6660