

Metro Vancouver, British Columbia

TRANSIT POLICE LEAD THE WAY THROUGH INNOVATION

The Transit Police Service of TransLink works to maintain the public peace and enforce laws on Metro Vancouver's transit system. Reducing assaults on operators is a priority for Transit Police. They apply many tactics to achieve that goal, including comprehensive incident response, follow-up with victims and offenders, CCTV implementation, media releases, and a Workplace Violence Committee.

"Don't Touch the Operator" is an initiative recently launched by Transit Police with the operators' union and the Coast Mountain Bus Company. Beginning in early 2014, this campaign installed a decal on every bus, and through Crime Stoppers offered a cash reward for tips leading to conviction.



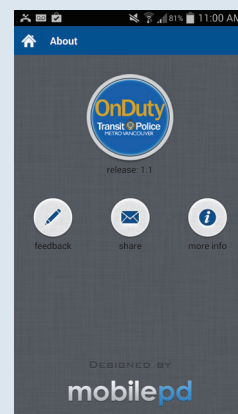
The "Don't Touch the Operator" campaign saw this decal installed on every bus in Metro Vancouver

Another innovation to help protect operators and transit customers is non-emergency SMS text reporting. Customers can now use a short text number (87-77-77, signifying TP-SS-SS which is short for "Transit Police – See Something – Say Something") to reach Transit Police dispatchers without drawing attention to themselves. The number of text messages sent through this service rose from 53 in January 2014 to 245 in April 2014.



Visible reminders to transit customers about using SMS to report non-emergency incidents

A third initiative of Transit Police is the new OnDuty smartphone app, released in June 2014. It allows transit customers to easily report problems to Transit Police, read news and information, see recent alerts (e.g. missing persons, special events, service disruptions), access social media, and view maps of crime hotspots. In OnDuty's first month of public usage, Transit Police recorded 315 conversations that involved a total of 4,800 text messages—a 40% increase over the number of conversations recorded the previous month using the 87-77-77 text service alone. Passengers have used OnDuty to report a wide variety of issues including fights, harassment, assault, sexual assault, drugs, disturbances, liquor use on the system, suspicious circumstances, mischief, panhandlers and people with medical issues. About 70% of conversations led to the creation of police files.



Home screen of the new OnDuty app



ISSUE PAPER 45

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STOPPING VIOLENCE AGAINST TRANSIT OPERATORS



The issue of violence against transit operators is a priority for Canadian transit systems, CUTA and the industry as a whole. A single assault on a transit operator represents a much larger threat to both public safety and the public's sense of security when using transit.

This paper reviews important data on violence against transit operators, shows what some innovative transit systems are doing in response, and summarizes progress with legislation that recognizes the critical nature of each assault on the men and women responsible for the safety of millions of people every day.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Transit operators generally work within arm's reach of customers, and interact with them frequently. Part of their job is to answer questions and enforce rules regarding fares and transfers. They are also the first line of contact with customers who may be angry, impaired or mentally ill. They are responsible for preserving a safe environment on their vehicles, and may be called upon to intervene in conflicts between passengers.

These circumstances create the very real risk that operators will become victims of assault at some point in time. All too frequently, they are grabbed, hit or spat on, or become the targets of threats, verbal abuse and thrown objects.

About 2,000 assaults against transit system employees are reported in Canada each year. That's more than five every day, with more going unreported. The risks of violent acts against transit operators are great, because most of these crimes occur on transit vehicles. Every assault against a transit vehicle operator is also a direct threat to dozens—even hundreds—of innocent customers, other road users and bystanders.

CUTA statistics reveal that just over 75% of assaults on transit employees occur on vehicles, and about 15% occur in stations. About 45% are categorized as Level 1 assaults (causing little to no physical harm), Level 2 assaults (causing bodily harm or involving weapons) or sexual assaults, while 31% involve threats or harassment.

THE INDUSTRY'S RESPONSE

The transit industry is working hard to protect employees, and by extension transit customers and other members of the public, from violence. CUTA is playing a key role in this effort through the Transit Ambassador program, working with transit systems to train operators to avoid, recognize and defuse potential conflicts.

Transit systems have a range of approaches to improve the physical safety of their employees. Some are creating specialized security forces such as TransLink's Transit Police in Metro Vancouver and OC Transpo's Special Constables in Ottawa. Some are installing video surveillance on vehicles and in stations, and adding barriers to separate

The Canadian Urban Transit Association (CUTA) is the voice of Canada's public transit industry. For additional information including research reports, industry updates, news bulletins and more, please contact us or visit our website.



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bus operators from customers. Some transit systems are building public awareness and customer engagement through smartphone apps and special SMS texting services. Some are providing follow-up support to employees who suffer violence, advocating on their behalf during investigations and trials, and managing previous offenders to minimize repeat incidents.

“The opportunity for operators to disengage and extricate themselves from potentially violent situations does not exist. They cannot walk away or withdraw from the incident, because they are locked in the driver’s seat and operating a large vehicle.”

– Neil Dubord, Chief Officer of Metro Vancouver Transit Police, testifying before the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee on June 12, 2014



LEGISLATORS SUPPORTING OPERATORS

Transit systems are not alone in their will to reduce violence against their employees. Parliamentarians are also rising to this public safety challenge. Since 2011, five different private member’s bills on this matter have been introduced in the House of Commons or the Senate. The bills varied in which section of the Criminal Code they sought to amend, and also in the definition of exactly which workers they sought to protect. Though differing in detail, the bills shared the intention of protecting transit vehicle operators and members of the public on and around transit systems.

The most recent bill addressing violence against transit operators was introduced by Senator Bob Runciman in May 2014. Bill S-221, An Act to Amend the Criminal Code (assaults against public transit operators) responds to variations in sentencing for individuals convicted of similar assaults on transit operators. The bill would not obligate judges to impose a minimum mandatory sentence; instead, it would require the court to consider the assault of a public transit operator engaged in the performance of his or her duty to be an aggravating circumstance for the purpose of sentencing. The bill’s definition of public transit operator includes school bus and taxi drivers in addition to bus, paratransit, tram, train, subway and ferry operators.

“This is a bill that balances Parliament’s right to provide direction to the courts in defined circumstances with judicial discretion at sentencing. It is a bill that I believe will help protect transit operators and passengers. I ask for your support for Bill S 221.”

– Senator Bob Runciman, Chair of Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee



On June 18, 2014 CUTA staff appeared before the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee to support Bill S-221. They were joined by Ottawa City Councillor and OC Transpo Chair Diane Deans, and labour representatives from the Amalgamated Transit Union and Unifor. The Committee adopted the bill and sent it to third reading in the Senate—the farthest any legislation regarding transit operator assaults has ever progressed in Parliament. If approved by the Senate, the bill will go to the House of Commons, where it would follow the regular legislative process.

AN ONGOING COMMITMENT

For CUTA, any assault on a transit operator is unacceptable. Addressing the issue of violence against transit employees is a key priority for industry members. CUTA will continue to lead in sharing best practices, and in seeking the active support of Canadian legislators, law enforcement agencies, and the judiciary.



Credit: Winnipeg Free Press

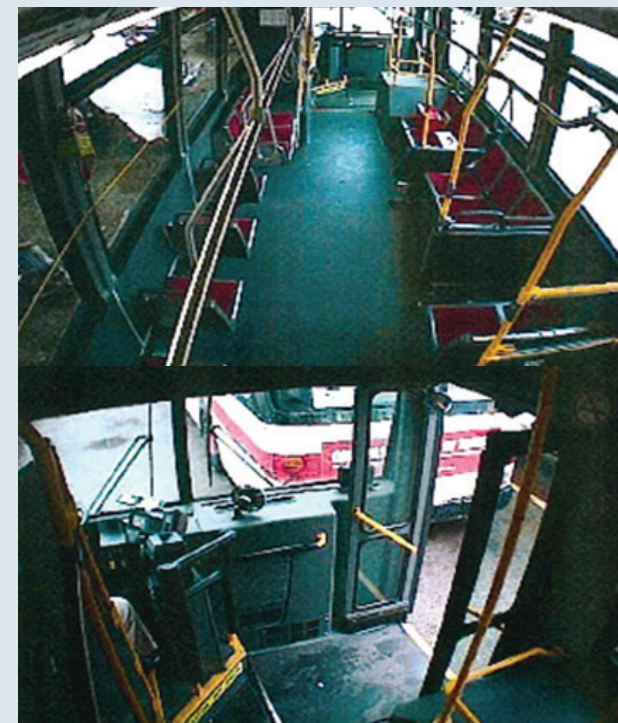
Toronto, Ontario

THE TTC’S SEVEN PILLARS OF PREVENTION

Between 2010 and 2013, the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) observed a meaningful decline in the annual number of assaults against operators (from 345 to 191) and threats against operators (from 216 to 81), in part due to prevention efforts implemented by the TTC. In 2013, most assaults (78%) happened on buses, with 16% on streetcars, 5% on subways and 1% on Wheel-Trans vehicles. Only 5% of assaults caused bodily harm. Almost half of all assaults (45%) involved spitting, one-third (33%) involved the use of hands or feet, 15% involved an object, and 7% involved liquids, snow or ice. The most common issue provoking assaults (39%) was fare enforcement, with 17% being unprovoked, 15% arising from operating disputes, 12% from impairment, and 4% from rules enforcement.

The TTC is addressing this issue using “seven pillars of prevention”:

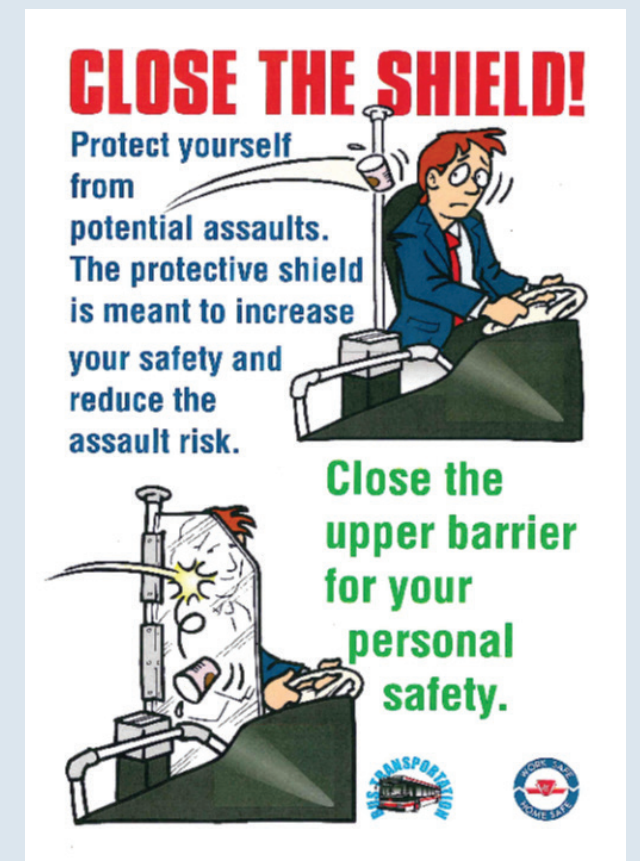
- An Employee Assault Prevention Team includes court advocates, TTC management, the Toronto Police and transit unions. It meets monthly to review employee feedback and statistics, to share information and emerging issues, and to follow up on other initiatives.
- Operator education raises awareness of what employees can do to behave professionally and prevent or defuse conflicts.
- A discretionary fare enforcement policy emphasizes that operators are responsible for collecting fares, but not at the risk of their own safety.
- Closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitoring of vehicle doors and interiors of buses has led to more than 95% of culprits pleading guilty after arrest, without the victims having to attend court. Improvements must continue to be made, as only 21% of assailants are arrested.



Credit: Toronto Transit Commission

CCTV images from a TTC bus

Two-part plexiglass barriers are available for operators, 98% of whom use the lower panel and 16% of whom use the upper panel. These barriers do not prevent all incidents: in 2013, 17 assaults involved culprits reaching around upper barrier and ten of these incidents resulted in physical contact.



Credit: Toronto Transit Commission

TTC information encouraging operators to use their plexiglass barrier

- Court advocates assisted 2,327 employees who were victims of violent crime between 2009 and 2013. Immediately after an assault, advocates contact victims and help them deal with stress by taking time off, changing routes or seeking counselling. They also communicate with police about the investigation, track the status of culprits after arrest and through the courts, speak with Crown Attorneys on behalf of the victim, attend the accused’s court appearances, help with victim impact statements, advocate for appropriate penalties, and report back to victims.
- News releases are written for cases where the culprit is sentenced to significant time in jail. Such cases also typically involve temporary and/or partial bans from using the transit system.
- The TTC is also considering the offer of a monetary reward for information leading to charges being laid against a culprit.