



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of the Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program — for Transit Agencies



Handling Violent and Unruly Passengers

Tips for Conflict Resolution

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Introduction

Understanding how to handle violent and unruly passengers is important for rural transit agencies and operators. Violent and unruly passengers can delay service, cause physical harm, and present a liability issue for transit providers. In the heat of the moment, it can be difficult to diffuse a difficult situation quickly and effectively; especially when operators are responsible for enforcing their agency's policies. This article identifies common types of violent and unruly passengers and offers mitigation strategies for transit agencies and operators.

Common Scenarios

National RTAP identifies common scenarios when a passenger may become violent or unruly, including:

- Refusal to pay
- Refusal to secure a mobility device
- Passengers under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Passengers angry with the level of service

- Passenger on passenger conflict
- Passenger on passenger harassment
- Passengers with weapons
- Passengers with dementia

Mitigation Strategies

Transit agencies have begun evaluating strategies to mitigate the effects of violent and unruly passengers on their operations. These strategies include driver training, improving surveillance and awareness, establishing an emergency response plan, and in some cases placing a physical barrier between drivers and passengers. Each of these strategies is discussed in depth in the following sections.

Operator Training

Operators cannot prevent violent or unruly passengers from entering their vehicle. In these highly emotional situations, it is important that operators are aware of de-escalation strategies. First, when a person is already emotionally charged, using the wrong tone, body language, or

invading a person’s personal space can escalate the situation even further. So, operators should be aware of how their actions may be perceived. In general, operators should avoid: clenching their fists or jaw, standing directly in front of the other person “squaring up”, or moving too close to the other person. Similarly, raising one’s voice can be threatening and should be used with caution.

Second, National RTAP recommends operators maintain a professional appearance. This helps an operator establish him- or herself as the authority figure on their vehicle from the moment passengers board. In other words, people who look and act like they are in charge will often be treated as if they are in charge. Operators should maintain good personal hygiene, wear clean and well-fit clothing, and avoid excessive slouching or arm crossing.

Finally, National RTAP recommends twelve verbal de-escalation strategies that may help operators navigate a tense situation. Examples include staying calm, presenting choices, finding something to agree on, and placing the issue on higher ground. Each of these strategies is applied to a real-life scenario in National RTAP’s “Problem Passengers” training. See Figure 1 for more information on how to access this training and other training resources.

Free Training Resources

- National RTAP – [Problem Passengers: Managing Difficult Passengers & Situation Learner’s Guide](#)
- National Transit Institute – [Assault Awareness and Prevention for Transit Operators](#)
- National Transit Institute – [Crisis Communication for Transit Employees](#)

Figure 1

Improve Surveillance and Awareness

Surveillance cameras have also been shown to decrease the likelihood of assault and other undesirable behavior. Simply put, people act differently when they know they are on camera. Transit agencies should not assume their passengers have read their ridership policies before boarding. Instead, signage should be present that clearly states the agency’s policies and the consequences of violating those policies. Similarly, signage should alert riders that they are being recorded. If an incident does occur, having proper signage and surveillance can help an agency enforce its policies and aid in the apprehension and prosecution of criminal violators.



Image taken from Winnipeg Transit

Establish an Emergency Response Plan

All transit agencies should have an emergency response plan that lays out how they will handle different scenarios, including problem passengers. An emergency response plan should include input from various agencies, including the police, local hospitals, and neighborhood associations. When preparing a response plan for violent or unruly passengers, a good place to start is for operators to work with the local police department to map areas where police response times may be lagging, that have a high crime rate, or that have crime that peaks at certain times of day. Agencies could then work with police departments to increase the police presence in high crime areas, reduce response times, or help establish neighborhood watch organizations. Moreover, agencies may even consider installing silent alarms that directly alert law enforcement in the area instead of dispatch. There is no one right way to plan for emergencies, and each agency should consider its resources, service

types, and unique safety issues when creating a plan.

Install Physical Barriers

Agencies that experience a significant number of assaults on their operators have experimented with installing physical barriers between operators and passengers, as recommended by the Transit Advisory Committee for Safety. Barriers reduce the likelihood that passengers will be able to physically harm the operator, allowing them to deal with the situation without fearing for their safety. However, not all barriers provide equal protection.

Fully enclosed barriers, recommended by TRACS, provide the highest level of protection for transit operators. Agencies like the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA) have begun retrofitting their fleet with partial barriers. Employees claim these partial barriers do more harm, essentially trapping them in their vehicle while providing little to no protection from passengers reaching around the front of the barrier.

In Kansas, all cutaways procured through the Kansas Coordinated Transit District Council have driver shields. However, these are partial barriers that mainly protect drivers from the rear. An agency that does not experience a significant number of assaults should exhaust

their other mitigation options before considering barriers, and if they determine barriers are necessary, they should opt for fully enclosed barriers.



Above: A common type of partial barrier. Note the ability of passengers to access the driver from the front of the vehicle. *The image is taken from London Free Press.*

Conclusion

Rural transit agencies face a number of unique challenges when it comes to violent or unruly passengers. From simple refusal to pay to violent assault and everything in between, rural agencies and operators must be prepared to respond quickly and effectively to ensure safety. Agencies looking to improve their effectiveness at mitigating the impact of violent and unruly passengers should consider training their operators in de-escalation techniques, improving surveillance and awareness, creating an emergency response plan, and implementing physical barriers between drivers and passengers.

Sources for this Article

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