



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Driving in the War Zone: How to Share the Road

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We all know that road rage is a growing problem on the roadways, whether we drive on urban roads or rural roads. Since 1987, the number of miles of road has increased by only one percent, while the number of vehicle miles traveled has jumped by 35 percent. Further-more, as of 1990, 91 percent of Americans drove to work, and according to a survey done by the Federal Highway Administration, almost 70 percent of urban highways are choked with traffic during rush hour. The result? More and more delays—and shorter tempers.

Road rage, or aggressive driving, has been described by researchers as “any unfriendly or threatening actions, including forcing another driver from the road, cursing another driver, or, in more extreme instances, shooting at the car of another driver.” While we know of no shootings involving Kansas transit drivers, and it is rather difficult to force a bus from the road, many have been on the receiving end of middle fingers and angry words.

In addition to the increased congestion, drivers today are more distracted from the road while driving. Cell phones and pagers, CD players, hand-held computers and fast food represent a society in a hurry. We use cars as personal space for carrying out our daily business, while anyone outside our vehicles may be considered an anonymous, inconvenient impediment to our progress.

The danger to transit drivers is that buses must operate in way that most irritates an impatient driver. Being large, transit buses are slow to accelerate and difficult to see around, making passing difficult. The vehicles typically must make many stops in traffic, delaying nearby drivers anxious



to get to their destinations.

Transit drivers may be prime targets for road rage incidents. Because of this, it is important that drivers be aware of the nature of road rage, methods for avoiding road rage situations, and ways to react positively if and when such situations do occur.

Faces of Road Rage

Road rage results when a driver loses his or her temper with another driver and reacts by driving or behaving

dangerously. While their aggressive driving is not usually intended to injure anyone, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 66 percent of the 250,000 traffic deaths since 1990 were caused by aggressive driving actions.

There are two types of road rage—situational and habitual. Situational road rage is predicated on the situation of the frustrated driver. He or she may have recently received bad news, may be tired and irritable, may be angry about any number of things. These personal situations can prove fatal when a driver overreacts to irritants on the road.

Habitual road rage refers to the driving behaviors we learned as children from our parents’ driving habits—or from other outside influences such as reckless driving habits depicted on television and in movies.

Whatever the motivation for road rage, it is clear that it is at least partially stimulated by certain roadway irritants. Many aggressive driving incidents involve an initial traffic mistake or more serious error followed by “instructional” action from the offended driver, which can range from something as (apparently) innocuous as flashing one’s headlights to forcing the offending driver off the road and/or a physical attack.

The most common behaviors that can anger other drivers are changing lanes without signaling, tailgating,

failing to dim lights, cutting people off, running red lights, flashing headlights, weaving back and forth between lanes, and failing to move out of the passing lane if driving more slowly. These behaviors are, for the most part, foolish and dangerous in and of themselves, but the real danger is how drivers react to them. It is possible to be the victim of aggressive driving even when the anger stems from an incident that didn't involve you.

Many communities have begun implementing initiatives to combat aggressive driving, but until the situation changes dramatically, transit bus drivers remain at increased risk. Fortunately, there are measures you can take to avoid such incidents.

Avoiding Road Rage

Here are some simple, common-sense actions you can take to minimize your risk of falling victim to another's road rage.

- Use your turn signals. Failure to do this is one of the most common roadway irritants, and is often responsible for accidents even in the absence of road rage.
- Follow the rules of the road; stay within speed limits, even if you are running behind schedule.
- Keep a safe following distance.
- If you must use a cell phone, use it in the "hands-free" mode or when pulled to the side of the road. In addition, individual agencies may have regulations on the use of phones while at work.
- Don't read a schedule or map while driving; focus your attention on the road and on other drivers.
- If you're in an area of heavy traffic and cars are backing up behind you, find a safe place to pull out of traffic and allow them to pass you.
- If you make a driving mistake that causes a problem for another driver, gesture to the driver that you're sorry. An apology can do a lot to stave off aggression. Because gestures can be and often are misinterpreted, a humorous yet effective method for apologizing is flashing a "Sorry" sign. Here's how: Make a small sign out of heavy paper or cardboard, write "Sorry" on it with a marker, and hold

Reality Check

Aggressive driving is not something only other drivers do. What about your own driving? Do you sometimes feel yourself losing your cool in your transit vehicle or your personal vehicle? (If you are not sure, take the Road Rage quiz in our next issue.)

What do you do to keep yourself calm? It is important to find your own method for doing this. You may want to create a relaxing environment with music, use meditative breathing techniques, or even do something as simple as counting to ten when angry.

Instead of focusing on defensive driving, focus on supportive driving. Try to identify with and understand other drivers on the road. Imagine how you would react if the driver you are angry with was your next-door neighbor, pastor, or best friend. Slow down and relax. If your transit schedule is impossible to complete without speeding or taking risks, talk to your supervisors to let them know it is not possible to meet the time constraints. Then work with them to find a solution.

It is important to remember that while driving you are part of a larger picture, part of a moving community. What part do you want to play in that picture? Do you want to be the angry guy with his head out the window, swearing a blue streak and pumping his fist in the air? Driving is a social activity and every action you take while on the road affects other motorists. When another driver does something you don't appreciate, look at your own actions. Have you ever done to someone else what was just done to you? In many situations you will find that you have, and if you can forgive yourself for those mistakes, it's easier to forgive others on the road for their mistakes. And that is what most apparent insults on the road are: mistakes. Don't make them into insults in your mind. Be aware of how your actions may make other drivers feel. In this way, you not only minimize your chances of falling victim to road rage, but make driving a more pleasant experience for those around you, and also for yourself.

it up in situations where an apology would be appropriate.

Facing Rage Safely

Unfortunately, there may be times when all the precautions in the world won't placate an angry driver. When confronted with road rage, remember that you cannot control the other driver; you can only control your own reactions. At times, the other driver may be truly out of control, so it is important that you act appropriately in one of these situations.

Don't react to an aggressive driver by making eye contact, shouting, or making obscene gestures. Control your own temper and keep your cool in traffic. Use your horn only when needed for safety, and don't stop to talk with another driver who is upset or aggressive (unless you are involved in an actual accident, of course).

If the incident persists or seems to be escalating, call the dispatcher for

assistance or, in more extreme cases, drive to the nearest police station.

Remember that you can only do your best to protect your own safety and that of your passengers, and your best does not include the ability to control other motorists.

Sources

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