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Division 3 Operator Mario Trigueros says his back support makes the difference in a long shift behind the wheel. Photos by Jimmy Stroup



Back Support Pilot Program a Hit With SGV Operators

BY JIMMY STROUP

(Jan. 13, 2006) At the end of a three-month pilot program designed to measure the effectiveness of a back support device, bus operators at North Los Angeles Division 3 and San Gabriel Valley Division 9 universally reported a 30 percent reduction of back, neck and shoulder pain.

Metro's testing of the Integral Orthopedics Inc. Moller Pro lumbar back support was the brainchild of Scott Boim, San Gabriel Valley Sector senior safety specialist, who discovered them at the 10th Annual National Ergonomics Conference in Las Vegas in December 2004.

"I went to the show and got some samples from Integral Orthopedics," he said. "I called them back a couple months later and said, 'We're having some really good results, could I have some more samples?'"

After the Florida-based company contributed some initial test units, Boim and San Gabriel Valley General Manager Jack Gabig went to Greg Kildare, Risk Management's Executive Officer, to request funding for an initial complement of 130 back supports—which they received with hearty approval. Labor Relations and the UTU were also supportive, and the pilot program was on.

"That was so successful that I went to Jack and (Administration and Financial Services Manager) Steve Rosenberg and said, 'I need 30 more,'" Boim said.

'Survey Says'

Volunteer bus operators were surveyed three times before receiving back

supports to test in service. The surveys determined the general condition of the volunteers' backs, shoulders and necks. Over the three-month testing period, operators in the study continued to report in monthly surveys. In July, Boim began compiling data using surveys at the two divisions.

Of the 98 operators who completed the entire survey battery, all but one reported some sort of improvement. Before the pilot program, most operators reported an "occasional" frequency of back, shoulder and neck pain—this was measured as a 3 on a scale of 5. At the end of the study, operators said they "rarely" experienced pain—measured as a 2 on the same scale.

"We measured it reactively to prove that it worked, but it's really a proactive device. It's to prevent back injuries," Boim said.

Part-time operator Mario Trigueros said that since receiving his, he's experienced less back pain and uses it every shift.

"This thing? I never drive without this," he said.

80 percent could benefit

In the study summary, Boim estimates that upwards of 80 percent of bus operators could benefit from the back support—and that its use could reduce job-related back injuries. The California Occupational Safety and Health Administration reckons the average cost of a back injury at \$25,000.

With the success of the back support, Boim is now testing orthopedic seats cushions also manufactured by Integral Orthopedics. He hopes the cushions, which are placed on top of the seat pan, will provide as much relief as the back supports have.

"They were really generous. They sent us 40 free (seats)," Boim said.