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Metro operator Drexel Delaney receives instruction from Atlas Ergonomics' Drew Bossen on the proper settings for his seat. At more than 6 feet tall, Delaney's settings will differ greatly from shorter or taller operators.



Photos by Jimmy Stroup

Division 9 Tries Seat Adjustment Training to Avoid Back Injuries

- System helps operators set bus seats, steering wheels for proper posture

BY JIMMY STROUP

(Jan. 24, 2006) With back injuries on the rise, San Gabriel Valley Division 9 has decided it's time to ramp up its dedication to ensuring bus operators are getting the attention and safety training they deserve to stay healthy.

Fresh off a pilot program in which back support was the issue, this time the scope has been expanded to deal with the operators' seat position and posture throughout the day—giving them the knowledge and information that can help them reproduce a good seat position in each different kind of coach they're working in.

In this effort, Senior Safety Specialist Scott Boim enlisted the help of Atlas Ergonomics, a Michigan-based consultant group whose physical therapists specialize in teaching office workers and drivers how to protect their backs from injury while on the job.

"What happens is that gravity kind of pulls us down and we get into a somewhat rounded position," said Drew Bossen, the Atlas physical therapist who spent a week with 130 San Gabriel Valley operators teaching them how to sit properly.

“When that happens, we lose the natural curve of the lower back and it puts an enormous amount of stress on the neck and it takes away from the natural flexibility of the spine. It becomes a kind of rigid post versus a natural spring,” he said.



Atlas-designed number strips underneath the NABI seat and the sidewall behind the seat help operators place their seat in the best position to avoid back injuries.

The number strip behind the driver tells the operator where to set the height of their seat to achieve the optimal setting for their body type.

Atlas Ergonomics provided these small cards so operators could reference their individual settings when they begin their shifts behind the wheel.

How it’s done

To combat incorrect seating posture, Atlas has developed a marking system that’s been fixed to the sides of Metro coach seats and steering columns. Custom pointers were also installed on each seat to point to the numbered strips.

The markings allow operators to place the seat and steering wheel in the same position every time, thereby reproducing the best possible position for each driver. Drivers are put in the seat, given instruction on how to adjust it properly for their height and weight, and then record their settings on a reference card.

“Each day it takes about a minute to set your seat up so you can make certain you’re in the best posture each and every day and are minimizing your risk for future injury,” Bossen said.

With pointers and markings installed on every NABI and TMC bus in Division 9’s fleet—215 all told—the design and installation was a big job for Metro and Atlas. It took four days to develop a pointer system that would be consistent for each bus design, but that wouldn’t hinder operators in their duties, either.

“They had to remove the seat pan and do some welding,” Boim said. “It was a big job.”

Mark Rodriguez has been driving for more than 20 years and said the program is a step in the right direction.

“It puts you in a better position to operate the coach,” he said. “So we get back into the same seat every time.”

Whiplash is serious

Back support and seat position aren’t the only thing the pilot program is focusing on:

headrests are also on the menu. Whiplash is a serious injury that a headrest can help prevent, Boim said.

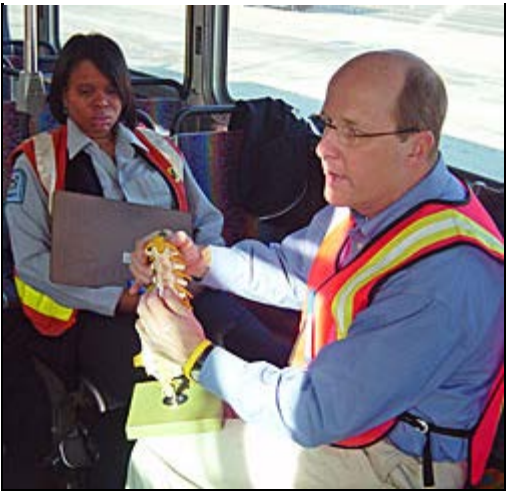
"If you look at many of our buses, the headrests have been removed and stored under the seat," he said. "The Atlas seat indexing program provides each operator with a personalized setting for headrest height and angle."

Pain and discomfort surveys were taken at the beginning of the program, and will be administered at 6- and 12-week intervals. As part of the pilot agreement, Atlas will collate the data and submit a report to Metro detailing any change in operator comfort.

Operator support was described as skeptical at first, but has changed to whole-hearted support. Division 9 Transportation Manager Dan Frawley said the operator comments he's received have been positive.

"I was photocopying something late the other night and this operator says to me, 'You know, that stuff really works.' I said, 'What stuff?' He said, 'That seat stuff,'" Frawley said.

Boim is optimistic about the program's chances to affect some change in the comfort levels and health of Division 9 operators, and hopes the results are such that Metro takes a hard look at expanding the program into other divisions.



Metro's Rhonda Newsome was one of 130 Division 9 operators who received instruction from Atlas Physical Therapist Drew Bossen about the structure of the back and how to care for it.