
BUS OPERATOR RESTROOM USE

Case Study and Practitioner Resources from Minneapolis

BUS OPERATOR JOINT TRAINING STANDARDS COMMITTEE

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Most people know how urgent it is to use the restroom when you need to. They may not know that not properly relieving yourself can contribute to health problems such as urinary tract infections. Extended urine retention has recently been recognised as a major distractor, as bad as sleeplessness or alcohol use. Transit operators are aware of these risks, but sometimes it is impossible for operators to use a restroom. Operators avoid drinking water and even taking medications that affect urination because they know their needs may conflict with schedules.

Some health issues faced by transit operators – including cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stress and unhealthy diets - have been given attention in the media and in contract negotiations between management and unions. Whether it is because there is not enough time built into route schedules to go to the restroom, no restrooms are located along the route, or available restrooms are unsanitary or unsafe, the use of restrooms by transit operators is a growing concern for operators. Adequate restroom access has not been effectively addressed until recently.

Minneapolis Metro Transit restroom use license agreement with local businesses (click image for full file)

Few transit agencies deal with transit operator restroom use within their contract negotiations or policy handbooks. Metro Transit and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 in Minneapolis, MN are an exception. Metro Transit began its restroom use initiatives in the 1980s, assigning a few of its operators to travel along each bus route and work with local, privately-owned businesses and organizations to secure restroom locations for operator use.

Restroom contracts. While some restroom areas are publicly available, contracts (this page) with business owners became accepted practice for Metro Transit to obtain restroom facilities for operators. In 1997, Metro Transit began to re-inspect some of the restroom facilities that it had established under contract or other agreement in the original 1980s push. This inspection became a regular routine. It allowed Metro Transit to reduce or eliminate payments for restrooms that were free to the public, no longer in business, or unsanitary. However, Metro Transit still believes in offering contracts to those smaller businesses where an operator using the restroom daily could affect the business's bottom line.

Collective bargaining. Obtaining restroom contracts to secure adequate restroom facilities for their transit operators is one of several steps that Metro Transit and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 have taken to ensure that their operators would have a suitable place to use the restroom. Metro Transit

and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1005 worked together to add adequate restroom use language to their negotiated collective bargaining agreement:

Proper toilet facilities will be designated at or near the end of each route. In the event an operator must go off-route to use a designated toilet facility, they may do so. The employee will be required to contact the TCC via bus radio prior to leaving the assigned route and advising the TTC of the change. If the TCC does not answer by the time the employee arrives at the necessary rest stop, the employee shall call them back upon return to the bus.


Metro Transit's Bus Operator Rule Book and Guide also addresses restroom use, stating, "Do not make stops en route and leave the bus unattended except to use toilet facilities or to use a telephone to call the TCC or garage."

While having restroom use policies and procedures in place is critical, it is equally important that transit operators are aware of these appropriate restroom facilities and the protocol for using them. Metro Transit makes operators aware of the restroom facilities by having trainers point out the restroom facilities along the route during required route training.

Metro Transit also provides operators with an 'Authorized Bus Operator Restroom Locations by Route' sheet (below). This sheet informs the operators of the restroom facilities that are located along each

Minneapolis Metro Transit authorized bus operator restroom locations chart - provided to operators (click image for full file)

route and the proper protocol for using those facilities (i.e. stop at desk to get key, no parking in front of building, restroom located on second floor, public restroom). Ensuring that operators are allowed to use the restroom, that facilities are adequate, and the operators are aware of the policy and the details is what makes Metro Transit's restroom use policy a best practice in the transit industry.

Failing to allow transit operators to use the restroom when needed can cause many negative outcomes for the transit companies: an increase in agency health insurance premiums, absenteeism, low worker morale and high operator turnover rate. To remain health and effective at work, transit operators should have the ability and the authority to use restroom facilities whenever they need to, without the stress of worrying about maintaining their route schedule. Metro Transit and the union leaders at ATU Local 1005 have recognized this and taken the appropriate steps to make it a win-win for both operators and the company. 

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Debbie Barnes has been driving a bus in Washington, DC for eight years and enjoys nearly every aspect of it, most particularly meeting and greeting her passengers. She picks a different route every day, driving through every neighborhood in what she describes as "a beautiful city".

The word "nearly" is used because, like many drivers, especially women, the dreaded topic of "bathroom breaks" just keeps coming up over and over again.

As ATU members know full well, it is a problem that seems to be intractable, but with enlightened and compassionate management it really is not. A member of Local 689, Barnes says it's not so bad when you have a one-hour trip with restrooms at the end of the line unless those restrooms, like one she knows about, are too filthy to even think about using.

"The homeless people use it as a place to live" she said, "And there is no one around to clean it on a regular basis."

Barnes also said there are bus lines that have rest rooms at one end of the line but not the other.

Bathroom issues vary from state to state. In New York, the transit agency contracts with stores to allow drivers (represented by ATU) to use the facilities. But in some cases, the drivers must deal with irate passengers who are not sympathetic to the needs of their bus driver and probably don't give a second thought to the health issues associated with "holding it."

In Phoenix, the city administration locked the public restrooms that drivers once used - and even those left a lot to be desired in terms of cleanliness.

"I think the bathroom break problem persists because of our natural discomfort with talking about the issue," says

International President Larry Hanley. "We need to be more aggressive in making sure that clean rest rooms and sufficient time to use them are negotiated into our contracts, and that those provisions are enforced. It's an important health and safety issue that really should be regarded as a human right."

Recalling one of his first days of training as a driver at age 21 in New York City (Brooklyn), Hanley says bathroom breaks has been a long standing problem in the industry. "I was at the end of my route and the guy training me said pull over because he needed to use the bathroom. He proceeded to walk to the back door and relieve himself outside," Hanley said. "I was pretty shocked, but he said 'that's your bathroom break'."

Ed Watt, the director of Safety and Health for the Transport Workers Union of America, blames management for tightening up the schedules, allegedly to save money.

"There used to be enough time for a bathroom break," Watt said, but now if you are running late (a decades-old issue in Manhattan, where buses get stuck in the middle of traffic of one million other vehicles per day) there is not enough time built in to the schedules, leaving drivers to fend for themselves with their ingenuity."

Dr. June Fisher, an associate clinical professor of medicine at the University of California (San Francisco), has studied the effects of transit work on the body and mind. Inadequate rest room time causes prostate problems, kidney failure and dehydration because drivers are afraid to drink too much liquid.

"There is no doubt that there are serious health issues here," Fisher said. "It shouldn't be that difficult to fix," adding that transit workers are already at high risk for cardiovascular diseases and hypertension.

In addition to the stress of ensuring public safety, meeting schedules, dealing with unruly passengers or fare beaters, the weather and traffic congestion, worrying about where and when you will be able to relieve yourself adds to the stress.

There are those who accept the health risks simply as the price drivers and their families pay in their line of work, but it is a huge price, indeed.

One model for civilized breaks can be found on the subways in New York. Some transit workers have keys to bathrooms at each station (bathrooms that were once open to the public for a fee of five cents). That takes care of trackwalkers, maintenance workers and token booth clerks, but it leaves out the engineer and conductor, some of whom can be in the train for up to 90 minutes.

One subway conductor, when asked about how he deals with the problem, just smiled and said, "Use your imagination. They give us break time in the schedule but it means nothing if your train is late for a lot of reasons beyond your control."

Minneapolis Metro Transit and ATU Local 1005 Collective bargaining language on restroom use (click image for full file)

As ATU grievance officers know, just because a clause (bathroom breaks or otherwise) is in the contract, doesn't mean the employer will adhere to it.

The point is that transit employees should not have to resort to using their imaginations to deal with an issue that costs them their good health. And the insurance costs resulting from insufficient bathroom breaks will ultimately cost transit agencies far more than simply providing operators the time any human being needs for this.

The time has come to address the issue more aggressively.



In March 2011, the Transportation Learning Center convened the Bus Operator National Joint Training Standards Committee, the sixth in a series of national joint labor-management transit training subject matter expert committees. Operator restroom use policies were a top priority. This case study and resource brief is an outcome of committee work on the topic.

The logo consists of five stylized, overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes in shades of blue and red, arranged horizontally.

TRANSPORTATION LEARNING CENTER

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