



Dealing with Difficult Customer Situations
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Center for Urban Transportation Research | University of South Florida

Funding for the Project

- Project was selected and funded through the Transit Cooperative Research Program
- Synthesis Project was governed by a national project panel
- Project was completed during 2016
- Purpose was to identify how transit agencies try to anticipate, prevent, respond to, and counter incidents involving difficult customer situations

Definitions

- Difficult customer situations are when customers are engaging in activity that makes transit personnel and other customers feel unsafe or uncomfortable



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Examples of Difficult Passenger Situations

- Loud phones or music
- Spitting, urinating, or fouling facilities and equipment
- Argumentative/frustrated/angry customers
- Customers with OCD or other mental/emotional disorders who act out
- Customers who are intoxicated or under the influence
- Customers with noxious odors
- Threatening/abusive/harassing behavior
- Disruptive behavior
- Actual fights or assaults



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Why is this subject important?

- The safety of customers is a transit agency's first obligation
- All transit passengers just want to get to where they are going with no fear or drama
- Difficult customer situations can negatively impact ridership
- One British study showed ridership could increase 11% if there were no difficult customer situations
- Transit agencies in the US report distinct ridership losses attributable to difficult customer situations
- Incidents get captured on social media and can discourage new riders



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Methodology

- Literature search
- Internet search engines for news articles
- Sent a 23-question survey to 49 agencies around the country



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Surveys and Data Collection

- Responses received from 41 of the 49 agencies that indicated an interest in completing the survey
- The 41 responding agencies came from 20 states and the District of Columbia
- 14 were small transit systems (100 or <)
- 16 were midsize transit systems (101 – 500)
- 11 were large transit systems (500+)



Transit Systems that Responded to the Survey for the TCRP Project "Dealing with Difficult Passenger Situations"



Number	Transit Agency Name
1	CanTran (PA) - Cambria County Transit Authority (Johnstown, PA)
2	CAJ Bus (CA) - Cienega Area Transit
3	Chemists (OR) - Salem Area Mass Transit District
4	ECCTA (CA) - Tri Delta Transit, Eastern Contra Costa Transit Authority (East side of San Francisco Bay)
5	LANTA (PA) - Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority
6	MCAAT (IL) - Macoupin County Area Transit
7	Metrolink (IL) - Rock Island County Metropolitan Mass Transit District (Quail cities)
8	Mountain Line (MT) - Mountain Line Transit Authority (Missoula)
9	NADPTA (AZ) - Northern Arizona Nonsegmental Public Transportation Authority (Flagstaff)
10	Puente City Line (IL) - Greater Puente Mass Transit District
11	RTC Ride (NV) - Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County (Reno)
12	SCAT (FL) - Sarasota County Area Transit
13	Capital Metro (TX) - Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Austin)
14	CATA (MD) - Capital Area Transportation Authority (Lansing)
15	CONTRD (NY) - Central New York Regional Transportation Authority (Syracuse)
16	C-TRAN (BC) - Clark County Public Transit Benefit Area Authority (Vancouver)
17	CLMTCO (IL) - Champaign-Mt. Carmel Transit District
18	DMRT (DE) - Delaware Transit Corporation
19	Fourth Street (CA) (East San Angeles)
20	Long Beach Transit (CA)
21	MARTA (TN) - Memphis Area Transit Authority
22	Olivetti (CA) - San Bernardino County Public Transit
23	PalmTran (FL) - Palm Beach County Palm Tron (West Palm Beach)
24	PSTA (FL) - Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority
25	RIDEA (NY) - Rochester-Saratoga Regional Transportation Authority
26	Star Metro (FL) - Tallahassee
27	SunLink (AZ) - Tucson
28	TANE (KY) - Transit Authority of Northern Kentucky (across the river from Cincinnati)
29	TARTA (OH) - Toledo Area Regional Transportation Authority
30	VIA (TX) (San Antonio)
31	AT-Transit (CA) - Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (Oakland)
32	King County Metro (WA) - King County Department of Transportation (Seattle)
33	MTA (MD) - Maryland Transportation Administration (Baltimore)
34	MOT (IL) - Mount-Dale Transit
35	Metro (IL) - Chicago, Illinois
36	MTD (CO) - Regional Transportation District (Denver)
37	San Diego MTS (CA) - San Diego Metropolitan Transit System
38	SMTA (CA) - San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency
39	Tillam (OR) - Tillamook Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon (Portland)



What are the most difficult and frequent customer situations?

- Fare disputes
- Customers with mental health issues
- Customers under the influence of alcohol
- Rudeness of customers (profanity, verbal abuse)
- Customers upset at late bus or missed connection
- Assaults on operators
- Disruptive student behavior
- Poor hygiene of customers
- Conflicts with regard to ADA issues (service animals, priority seating)



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Are incidents of difficult customer situations increasing?

- 6 said they don't have data
- 14 said no, and a few even said they were decreasing
 - Operators wear uniforms that look like police
 - Rider suspension policy has removed worst offenders
 - Real time bus arrival information defuses tension
 - Twitter reduces uncertainty and anger
 - Most passengers have "tuned out" on smart phones



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Are incidents of difficult customer situations increasing?

- 22 said yes, for a variety of reasons
 - An increased number of people with mental health issues
 - A higher number of people who are homeless make others feel uncomfortable
 - Some transit agencies now replace yellow bus school service and have more boisterous students
 - Anger over insufficient wheelchair spaces and bike racks
 - Poor service quality causes passengers to vent
 - Transit work stoppages caused people to lose jobs



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What are the best ways to address difficult customer situations?

- Education and outreach
- Establishment of rules of conduct and passenger trespass warrants
- Training of transit personnel and development of clear procedures
- Use of technology
- Law enforcement when necessary



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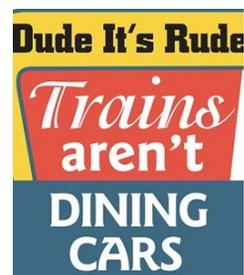
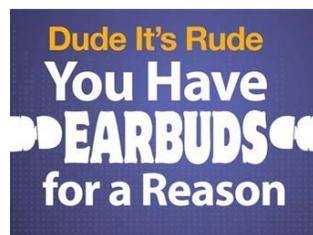
Education and Outreach as Prevention

- Meet with people at fairs, neighborhood associations, senior centers, PTA events, churches, etc.
- Teach people the “rules of the road” and transit etiquette, use printed materials and videos
- Focus on schools at registration and back to school nights; WMATA has a “Respect your ride” program
- Offer field trips to the transit agency, take buses to summer camps
- OmniTrans has specially equipped bus for hands-on training for new bus riders with interactive features



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Information Campaigns



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Codes of Conduct

- “Rules of the Road” or Codes of Conduct identify unacceptable behavior and consequences for violations
- They provide legal authority for agency interventions
- Rules are placed on placards, transit guides, websites, posters, digital displays, brochures, digital signs, etc.
- Point is to eliminate the excuse that passengers don’t know the rules and to eliminate claims that a transit employee is being arbitrary as they enforce rules
- List of prohibited activities can be relatively brief or incredibly long



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Examples of Prohibited Behavior

- No drinking, smoking, eating on board vehicles
- No disruptive behavior such as loud conversation or music, profanity, rude insults, etc.
- No animals, illegal weapons, or combustible materials
- No littering, spitting, urinating, vandalizing, soliciting, horseplay, fighting, or otherwise interfering with vehicle operations
- Agency might have graduated prohibitions for repeat offenders with ultimate action of being banned
- Document actions and provide avenues of appeal



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Training to Defuse and De-escalate

- Personnel are trained to avoid confrontation
- Object is to remain positive, courteous, and professional and not take anything personally....do not get emotionally hijacked! Watch tone of voice
- Practice verbal judo, use "I" and not "You" language
- Agencies should provide stress management training, leave problems at home, breathing techniques, even massage on the property (VIA)
- Training available through TSI, NTI, Easter Seals, and a number of private companies
- Videos, case studies, role-plays, group discussion



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Technology to Deal with Difficult Passenger Situations

- Security cameras – on vehicles, at stations, and park and ride facilities
 - Post signs on vehicles and at facilities letting people know of the cameras
 - Encourage operators to point to the cameras when someone acts out
 - Cameras help to apprehend offenders for prosecution
 - Videos make excellent training tools
- Silent alarms, emergency access buttons
- Annunciator systems to remind people of the rules
- Automated Vehicle Locating systems



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Bus Operator Barriers



Bus Operator Barriers

- 8 of the 41 have installed bus operator barriers
- Four agencies installed, then removed barriers
- There are a variety of designs, including a dutch-door barrier
- MDT, WMATA, and Maryland Transit Authority all report noticeable decreases in operator assaults after installing these barriers

Technology to Deal with Difficult Customer Situations

- Monitors on board let passengers know they are being watched and recorded
- Being tested at LBT and WMATA
- WMATA claims a 30% reduction in assaults on operators



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Applications for Smart Phones to Report Incidents in Real Time

Download RT's New
Mobile Reporting App

Alert SacRT



The new Alert SacRT mobile reporting app for iOS and Android devices will be available for downloading starting on Monday, September 19. Alert SacRT will offer riders a quick and discreet method for reporting safety and security concerns directly to RT Police Services (RTPS) using a smartphone or tablet. App users can send photos, six second video, text descriptions, and locations of suspicious people or activities.

Available on the App Store

GET IT ON Google play



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Law Enforcement Personnel

- Simple presence of uniformed law enforcement helps to discourage unacceptable behavior
- Four agencies reported having their own transit police department
- Eight contract with local police departments for additional security
- Four smaller systems provide office space for local police at terminals
- Miami-Dade Transit contracts with a major private security firm that is supplemented by local police



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Procedures for Handling Incidents of Difficult Passenger Behavior

- There is not enough funding to have a supervisor, security agent, or policeman/woman on every vehicle
- The first option is always the good judgment of the vehicle operator. A well trained operator can handle the vast majority of situations with a difficult passenger
- The art of de-escalation is the most effective deterrent
- "Passengers can be described as different, difficult, or dangerous. The operator is one word away from bringing the passenger to the next level or down the scale."
- Operators should default to their training, and follow procedures when more support is required



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Vehicle Operators Most Important Training

- Be courteous, patient, professional, and respectful regardless of circumstances
- Avoid confrontation at all costs
- Take nothing personally
- Never take away a person's dignity and always give them an "out"
- Don't put yourself in a position of enforcing an ultimatum because ultimatums don't work on difficult customers who are in an unbalanced condition



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Basic Procedures for Almost All Incidents

- The bus operator should practice the steps noted above and do his/her best to keep the bus in service versus engaging in an argument and stopping the bus
- The bus operator should advise the radio dispatch supervisor of any situation that gets escalated and ask for guidance in terms of what to do next
- If there appears to be no danger of violence, a field supervisor should be sent to meet the bus and deal with the customer who can offer options to the passenger
- If the situation escalates beyond the control of the supervisor, then local law enforcement is called



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Basic Procedures for Specific Incidents

- Failure to pay the fare: if the operator is not familiar with the passenger, remind them of the proper fare, let them ride and suggest they pay the next time they board. If the operator knows the passenger habitually avoids paying, call the supervisor to meet the bus and have the passenger removed.
- Being intoxicated is not grounds to prevent someone from riding unless they are a threat to themselves or others. Operators are not allowed to deny service unless instructed by a supervisor. The supervisor will be called to assist, and law enforcement if necessary.
- Passengers with apparent mental health issues are dealt with similarly to intoxicated passengers. Bus operators make their best judgment and call for supervisory assistance if needed. If removed, the supervisor might take the passenger to their final destination, social service agency, medical facility, or police station depending on their condition.



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Basic Procedures for Specific Incidents

- Dealing with open wounds, or offensive odor or hygiene: usually take no action unless the hygiene issue poses a threat or safety concern or would cause discomfort or sickness to other passengers. If that is the case, the dispatcher is called immediately and the bus is stopped if dispatcher directs. Bus will be met by a field supervisor and passengers allowed to transfer to another bus.
- Disruptive passengers are dealt with case by case, with operator reminding passenger of rules of conduct and potential consequences. Bus is pulled off the road only if there is a danger to passengers. Supervisor may remove passenger, or place them back on the bus and follow it, or call for law enforcement. If things escalate sooner, operator should hit panic button to notify dispatch and change headsign to say "Call Police."



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The Challenge

- Public transit is characterized by strangers sharing space for a limited time
- Passengers share a common goal of reaching a destination safely
- They are all human with different perspectives and values and different tolerance levels for certain types of human behavior
- People can have bad days, while others have more serious issues of mental illness or personality disorders, while others might have disabilities



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The Response

- Public education programs and outreach
- Training front line transit personnel in handling themselves and others with courtesy, respect, professionalism
- Establishing clear rules of conduct for customers and legal authority for action
- Maximizing the use of technology
- Establishing clear procedures for transit personnel
- Utilizing law enforcement when necessary
- Getting assistance from social service agencies
- Get input from front line personnel
- Provide assistance to personnel who have experienced trauma



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The Response

- Getting assistance from social service agencies
- Get input from front line personnel
- Provide assistance to personnel who have experienced trauma
- Provide quality service that helps ensure people reach their destinations on time



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