



Reduce harmful work stressors.
Improve job quality and health.

Healthy Work **Strategies**

Programs and policies to reduce work stress among bus drivers in the United States and Canada (bus driver case study #1)

Urban bus driving is a stressful occupation. Bus drivers' most important priority is safety, and this requires constant vigilance – highly focused attention – on the actions of other drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists along congested routes in all kinds of weather.^{1,2} At the same time, bus drivers are forced to be sedentary, that is, sit for long hours with few breaks, deal with traffic, and try to stick to a tight schedule in order to stay “on time.” The breaks they have are often short and dedicated to finding a bathroom, which are often not available. In addition, bus drivers encounter annoyed passengers, which sometimes escalates to violence. Urban bus drivers typically do not earn high wages, so many rely on routine overtime to supplement their pay.^{1,2}

Bus driver health and safety

As a reflection of the job stresses faced by bus drivers, they experience high rates of cardiovascular disease, including high blood pressure, heart attacks, and stroke.^{1,2} Bus drivers also have high rates of musculoskeletal disorders, which usually involves pain and discomfort in the neck, back, shoulders, arms, and/or legs, sometimes leading to disability or absence from work.³ Bus drivers also have a higher rate of weight gain and obesity compared with other occupational groups,^{4,5} and high rates of using alcohol during non-working hours as a means of relaxing.⁵ Finally, bus drivers are the target of assaults by passengers.^{1,6,7}

Programs and policies

A 2014 report published by the U.S. Transportation Research Board (TRB) describes workplace health protection and promotion (WHPP) programs in U.S. and Canadian transportation agencies of various sizes that employ bus drivers.⁸ The programs focus mainly on workplace health promotion and wellness, or ergonomics.

One example of a health promotion program is access to onsite fitness facilities, which may help some workers to fit exercise into a busy workday. However, for bus drivers

working irregular shifts with tight schedules and little room for breaks or downtime, trying to fit in exercise can be very challenging. The 2014 report indicated that bus drivers made less use of onsite fitness facilities compared with administrative and other staff. Although the worksites profiled in the report include impressive, innovative wellness programs, many of them do not match well with scheduling demands.

Some of the programs did try, in small ways, to reduce sources of work stress, for example:

- Allowing for recovery time (rest break time at the end of a route)
- Training on reducing conflicts between bus operators and customers
- Scheduled comfort stops with restrooms (bathroom access)
- A restroom policy along with education about the policy
- Contracts with businesses along routes that offer use of restrooms
- An ergonomics program

In the 2014 TRB report, there are several instances of wellness program managers and union representatives observing that for a wellness program to benefit bus operators, the program should more directly address the unique challenges operators face. In one employee survey that asked how wellness activities could have the most impact, the most common answers were complaints about tight schedules that left no time for bathroom breaks or lunch.

Orange County, California, Transit Authority (OCTA)

As described in the 2014 TRB report, the Orange County Transit Authority (OCTA) had a program with various components specifically trying to reduce sources of work stress among bus operators. These include a policy in which recovery time is built into schedules.

OCTA promoted micro breaks during bus operators' work shifts, worked to get vending machine suppliers to provide healthy food and beverage choices, and evaluated bus equipment with safety and injury prevention as a priority. Wellness program staff generally placed importance on the need for vendors and other resource organizations to be mindful of operator schedules and work culture. The OCTA also had a program involving experienced bus operators and trainers – called “ambassadors” – who would ride with bus operators and observe and correct biomechanical issues (improve ergonomics), and provided advice on responding to passengers. Unfortunately, by 2014, the “ambassador” program was no longer in use.

The Ambassador Program in San Francisco, California

The Ambassador Program was a pilot project developed in San Francisco in 1998 to improve bus driver working conditions and relationships between bus drivers and passengers, a collaboration between the Transport Workers' Union, the San Francisco Municipal Railway, riders' representatives, physicians who worked with bus drivers, and researchers.⁹ The aims of the program were to increase the numbers of buses and drivers

on certain routes, have less rushed running time, improved recovery time for bus drivers, improved equipment, improved training for bus drivers, and the chance for riders to receive education about the system. Because the project involved an inadequate budget and a limited number of vehicles, buses were taken away from another route, resulting in increased stress due to fewer buses on the other route. The pilot project was not continued or expanded.

Conclusions

U.S. and Canadian transit agencies have focused mainly on workplace health promotion. Some have tried to reduce work stressors and improve driver health by trying to improve scheduling and increasing drivers' break time, and incorporating ergonomic improvements to reduce injuries. But, most wellness programs place responsibility for health on bus drivers and not on the work environment.

Labor unions have worked to provide for greater bathroom access for bus drivers through public education, advocacy and collective bargaining, and efforts to reduce violence against bus drivers through legislation and bus design. Such efforts need further research in order to evaluate their effectiveness. Please see the other four case studies posted on <https://healthywork.org/resources/healthy-work-strategies/> on strategies to reduce stressors faced by bus drivers.

In some European programs (see Stockholm and Copenhagen case studies), there was more focus on improving the drivers' work environment. In Stockholm, this included physical route changes, such as separate bus lanes, passenger peninsulas, and electronic bus schedule information in buses and at bus stops, which were innovations in the 1990s. These improvements are now common in Europe and North America.

The Copenhagen project went much further and included many programs and policies involving improvements in scheduling, holiday time, taking time off, and communication; development of skills, such as training in management and communication, improved training of new hires, and providing courses on topics like handling conflicts, threats and violence; and improvements to and replacement of buses, and radio systems. US and Canadian transit agencies could benefit from the lessons learned in the Copenhagen project.

References:

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