

Uptick in assaults on CTA bus drivers



MARY WISNIEWSKI
Getting Around

It's not always easy driving a CTA bus.

Besides trying to safely weave a 20-ton vehicle through city traffic, drivers get yelled at, offered phony fare cards, and, on rare occasions, physically attacked.

The bus drivers union said it is seeing an increase in assaults on drivers, which it blames on inadequate barriers on buses,

lack of mental health services in the city and disrespect for people just doing their jobs.

"You have to look at what's going on in our city, with the closing of mental institutions and a lot more homeless people on the street," said Keith Hill, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 241. He said sometimes disputes over a fare or the failure of a Ventra card can lead to a hostile situation.

The CTA said the number of serious attacks has remained stable in recent years, but it shares the union's concerns and is working on more measures to protect drivers.

"One incident is one too



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CTA bus driver Dexter Jackson's vehicle is equipped with a barrier shield made from a polycarbonate called Lexan.

many," said CTA spokesman Brian Steele.

Assaults in recent years have included drivers getting punched in the head, tear-gassed, doused in bleach, shot at, egged, pelted with snowballs and even hit with a bag of frozen chicken, according to Hill and CTA records.

The CTA said that it has reported to the federal government an average of about 30 driver assaults per year that are bad enough for the driver to go to the hospital — at 35 in 2014, 29 in 2015, 27 in 2016, 26 in 2017 and 12 through

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CTA drivers report more attacks by passengers

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June of this year. The CTA employs about 4,000 operators, which shows that the incidents are rare.

Hill said the union is also looking at attacks that may not require medical attention, such as being spat upon. Since the union started keeping a tally of attacks last fall, it has seen a rise as the months have gotten warmer — from an average of 8.6 incidents per month October through February to 16.3 incidents per month March through August.

Union members have passed out flyers demanding "maximum felony charges" against those accused of bus driver attacks.

One serious assault was reported earlier this month. According to police, a 47-year-old female bus driver was driving along the 8600 block of South Damen Avenue on Sept. 12 when a male passenger began smoking a cigarette. Another passenger complained to the driver, which led the smoker to walk up to the driver, grab her breasts and demand sex, police said. The driver fled the bus and the perpetrator tried unsuccessfully to drive, police said.

The man accused of the assault is in custody, charged with three felony counts of criminal sexual abuse, vehicular hijacking and aggravated battery against a

transit employee, according to the Cook County state's attorney's office.

While both the CTA and the union agree that more needs to be done to stop assaults on drivers, they differ on what to do.

Steele said most buses are equipped with operator barrier shields, which are made from a strong, clear polycarbonate called Lexan. Older buses have partial shields, while newer ones have full doors, Steele said. Neither completely encloses drivers, and some buses have no barriers at all.

Each bus has up to 10 security cameras, Steele said. The CTA is also adding security cameras and extra lighting to bus turnarounds. The agency upgraded its bus communications systems in 2014, providing drivers a link to the CTA control center.

Hill said current barriers are inadequate and can be easily pulled back by passengers. "We want to be fully enclosed," said Hill. The union favors a barrier that completely shields the driver — similar to the way a rail operator is fully enclosed — with a window that allows drivers to interact with passengers but can be shut quickly in case of an emergency, Hill said.

The union also wants more police help on problem routes in high-crime neighborhoods such as Englewood, Garfield and

Lawndale. Police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi said police have a dedicated public transportation unit devoted exclusively to CTA safety, and individual districts work with the agency on directed police patrols.

The union also seeks more training for drivers, to teach them how to better defuse situations, and it wants the CTA to be able to ban some people permanently from public transit. "If you can ban a person from a store or a place of business, you can ban them from the bus," said Hill.

Early this past summer, CTA President Dorval Carter established a new committee to reduce operator assaults, which will include doing more data analysis, Steele said. The committee also will explore pushing for tougher legal penalties for operator assaults.

The agency also will be trying out TV-monitor screens that hang at the front and center of the bus that will show customer information and have the capability of showing live feeds from the buses' interior security cameras, Steele said. These would be similar to the screens in some stores that show a security-camera view of shoppers.

"We think it will help increase awareness of the security cameras and serve as a deterrent," said Steele. He did not have a cost yet for the pilot program — he

said the TV monitors would be rolled out by the end of the year on a limited basis and tested for customer feedback.

Attacks on bus drivers are an issue for the Amalgamated Transit Union nationally, which is supporting a bipartisan bill in the U.S. Congress that would seek to protect operators by adding barriers and training drivers to help de-escalate hostile encounters.

Transportation song quiz

Last week's song was about a train that used to run through the Deep South. The songwriter also wrote the music for movies that included a coin bank as a character. The song is "Dixie Flyer," by Randy Newman, who also did the music for the "Toy Story" movies. The winner was Vicki Kastory of Northbrook, who even was able to name the coin bank — "Hamm."

This week's song is about a four-legged means of transportation, the color of the sun, who takes the narrator across the southern border to avoid a little trouble. What's the song, and who wrote it? The first to email me with the correct answer gets a Tribune notebook, and glory.

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Charges upgraded in attack on bus driver

Women charged with dumping liquor on CTA driver

BY ADAM THORP, STAFF REPORTER
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Two women who allegedly dumped liquor on a CTA bus driver and hit her with a milk crate will face felony charges — an announcement that came as transit workers rallied for more serious charges in such attacks as well as more protections on the job.

About 50 members of unions representing bus drivers and workers protested outside a branch Cook County courthouse at 155 West 51st Street Monday in advance of a hearing about an incident involving bus driver Melissa Barker.

Barker, who attended the protest, said she was attacked on July 19 by two women while she was driving a bus in the 6900 block of South Halsted. The women were passengers on the bus when they approached the front, and one of the women dumped tequila on Barker and then threw the bottle over a protective barrier, barely missing her, Barker said. The second woman poured more liquor on her and struck her with a milk crate, Barker said.

According to a police report, one of the women said, "I'm gonna eat your ass" before exiting the bus. The pair then got on another bus, according to the report, but were arrested.

"It was not an argument about me. It wasn't an argument about getting off the bus, anything. It was just random," Barker said.

Barker was unable to work for six weeks, and is now back on light duty. She has two bulging discs in her neck and cannot yet drive a



Melissa Barker (at microphone) talks about being attacked while driving a CTA bus this summer. ADAM THORP/SUN-TIMES

bus.

"I love my job. School time, the kids, I'm missing all that," Barker said.

The women were identified in court records as Miraha Gibson, 20, and Jada Goodall, 18.

The two women were initially charged with misdemeanor battery, drawing objections from the unions and the CTA. The Cook County state's attorney's office did not respond to a request for comment.

After the rally, the workers learned prosecutors planned to file new felony charges.

Barker hoped the new charges would be a "deterrent" for future attacks.

"It sends out a message that you cannot attack us and get away with it," Barker said.

Union leaders called for further

steps to protect drivers, including more police on high-crime routes and new protective barriers that would totally enclose drivers, allowing them to interact with the public through a quick-closing window.

Existing barriers "are good, but they could be better," Amalgamated Transit Union Local 241 president Keith Hill said.

CTA spokesman Brian Steele said in a statement that the agency tried to prevent any assaults on drivers, but that attacks were rare. There have been 22 assaults that required medical treatment this year through the end of August, he said.

Hill says there have been about 15 attacks per month this year if you include incidents like drivers getting spit on.

A new CTA committee is considering steps to increase driver safety, and the transit agency will launch a pilot test of a system that allows drivers to see a live feed from on-board security cameras, Steele said.



Miraha Gibson



Jada Goodall