

Recommendations on Onboard Bus Safety Strategies

About these Recommendations

This document lays out the Public Safety Advisory Committee's (PSAC, the committee) recommendations for strategies to improve bus operator and passenger safety on Metro. During internal focus groups and staff interviews, bus operators expressed concerns about their safety in the system, particularly after 3:00 p.m. and during nighttime service. Operators also reported that Code of Conduct violations are frequent and often go unaddressed. In response, Metro's board has allocated \$3M for onboard safety strategies, including CCTV, increased staff presence, and improved emergency communications protocols. The following recommendations include opportunities to improve bus operator security through non-law enforcement alternatives and other staffing solutions. The document also identifies opportunities to implement improvements to the design of buses and on-system communications infrastructure.

A Note on Deployment & Data

PSAC understands that the lines chosen for deployment of these onboard bus safety strategies will be primarily determined by the number of bus operator assaults, with additional consideration given to the number of Code of Conduct and fare enforcement violations. The committee recommends that Metro consider additional factors including the following: reviewing incident reports for contextual information on rider and operator assaults, bus service reliability and timing, and vehicle conditions in their analysis. Metro should review incident reports to understand the factors influencing assaults on drivers and passengers (e.g., inability to pay fares, passengers experiencing mental distress, etc.). They should use this context to determine the appropriate staffing response (e.g., considering fare-free options, enhanced presence, and flexible deployment of mental health service providers, etc.). Additionally, Metro should prioritize customer experience enhancements on priority bus lines, focusing on enhancing reliability, delivering excellent customer service, providing real-time information, and ensuring cleanliness on vehicles and at stops.

Expanding the Scope of Public Safety Considerations

PSAC recommends that Metro considers customer experience, service improvements, and fareless transit programs as interventions that improve public safety on buses. Looking beyond the traditional security methods of staffing, physical interventions, and communication, focusing on improved service and rider satisfaction will greatly improve safety outcomes in the system. With fare collection being a key point of contention between riders and operators, the committee endorses a fareless transit program to eliminate that point of conflict. Additionally, this policy will assist low-income riders – the primary users of Metro transit – by improving access to jobs and recreation. Metro bus riders are more numerous and ride more miles than rail riders, at almost a 4:1 disparity during 2021.¹ Given that bus riders make up the core of Metro service, the agency should continue to prioritize working with local jurisdictions to implement bus-only lanes and dedicate internal resources for vehicle deep cleaning to meet the needs of their core ridership.

Staffing Strategies

¹ Metro Ridership. (n.d.). Retrieved August 10, 2022, from <https://isotp.metro.net/MetroRidership/YearOverYear.aspx>

PSAC has articulated the following recommendations to improve and expand staffing on Metro's bus routes. These recommendations will enhance safety for riders and operators and foster a rider culture as outlined in PSAC's [Mission, Vision, Values](#), and [Code of Conduct](#) documents:

- **Increased Staff Presence:** Currently, Metro's contract law enforcement partners deploy teams of officers to ride buses that are deemed priority safety concerns. However, these partners lack the resources to sufficiently cover the system. In keeping with PSAC's long-term vision to shift funding from law enforcement to non-law enforcement alternatives, the committee has identified opportunities to add Metro staff presence on buses to improve operator and rider safety.

PSAC recommends that Metro deploys a combination of the following solutions as appropriate: transit ambassadors, homeless outreach teams, mental health crisis response teams, unarmed Metro transit security officers, and social service providers. Increased uniformed staff presence can alleviate the stress felt by operators and reduce Code of Conduct violations. These employees can also act as a liaison between law enforcement in emergencies. Metro may consider utilizing a "buddy system," where vehicle operators are consistently accompanied by a staff member from the applicable partner named above. In this "buddy system," those partners would be present throughout the driver's shift, rather than responding to incidents.

Additionally, Metro's recruitment efforts for these positions should focus on reaching people who live in the communities served by priority bus lines, individuals involved with the justice system, veterans, and people facing barriers to employment.

- **Staff Training:** PSAC highlighted the need for staff on the system to be culturally competent, trained in de-escalation techniques, familiar with Metro's security ecosystem, and aware of how they interface with law enforcement. Cultural competency means that staff should be recruited from (or have an understanding of) the communities these bus lines serve. See recommendation #8 "[Acknowledging context for vulnerable transit riders](#)" from the Code of Conduct recommendations for further information on how the experience of public safety on transit differs for different population groups. To this end, the committee recommends that onboard bus staff are well-trained in de-escalation techniques that can be utilized in tense situations. Staff must also have a full understanding of Metro's security system and the roles of non-law enforcement alternatives and non-contracted law enforcement. Staff must be able to easily assess a situation and deploy the proper resources as needed.
- **Increased Partnerships with Cities and the County:** The Metro system extends through many cities across LA County. Recently, certain cities indicated their interest in partnering with Metro on contracted law enforcement duties. Rather than utilizing these cities' resources as law enforcement, PSAC recommends exploring partnerships between Metro and these cities to provide non-law enforcement staffing solutions. These partnerships would increase local staff presence along Metro's bus lines without expanding the law enforcement services from LAPD and LASD. Additionally, Metro may consider partnering with LA County to provide services specifically for unincorporated areas.
- **Customer-Centric Workforce:** Metro should train and foster a workforce with a strong culture of providing excellent customer service. However, this approach will only be achieved through high-quality jobs that offer competitive wages.

Physical Intervention Strategies

Making improvements to the environment on the bus and at stops will help improve safety and comfort for riders and operators. PSAC has articulated the following recommendations as physical interventions to improve onboard bus safety:

- **Improved Rider Environment:** The environment onboard a bus will impact the way riders interact with each other and the Metro system. Maintaining a clean bus can reduce anxiety and discomfort among riders, leading to improved perceptions of safety. PSAC also recommends that Metro improve the environment at bus stops to alleviate stress among riders; this includes well-maintained bus stops that have adequate lighting, shade structures, and benches.
- **Panic Button Modifications:** To modify the existing panic button for bus operators, Metro may consider including features that alert waiting bus riders, partners responding to incidents, and other relevant parties to incidents occurring on the vehicle. This could occur through messages on the bus destination sign, signal lights, or other visual notifications. It is important that these modifications do not exacerbate the unfolding situation and should be designed accordingly. However, the committee would like this strategy to be considered a lower priority than staffing and rider environment improvements.

Communication Strategies

PSAC has prioritized building a positive relationship between the public and Metro as a key safety strategy. PSAC has articulated the following recommendations as communication strategies to improve onboard bus safety and improve customer service:

- **Service Alerts:** PSAC has noted there have been instances of buses passing riders at bus stops because they are full. This may result in unhappy passengers when the next available bus arrives, increasing the likelihood of an incident. PSAC recommends developing or utilizing an existing application or alert system that will notify riders ahead of time whether a bus is unable to take on more passengers. Additionally, when a bus is unavailable, PSAC recommends offering an alternative mode of transport for riders (e.g., Metro Micro) to use.
- **Public Campaigns:** PSAC has highlighted an opportunity for Metro to build stronger relationships with bus riders through public campaigns and outreach. This includes getting to know routine commuters on bus lines to start a “Get to Know Your Rider” campaign. Additionally, PSAC recommends establishing a reward system by enabling Metro staff and security to recognize riders that are courteous and helpful. Through positive messaging and reinforcement, Metro can emphasize that bus safety is a collective responsibility.