

Curbing Transit Operator Distracted Driving

Cell phone use and texting have played a role in numerous public transportation accidents.

Between 2007 and 2009, two major accidents took place that involved operators who were using cell phones and texting while driving. These two incidents – in California and Massachusetts - resulted in the deaths of 25 people, injuries to hundreds, and extensive property damage.

In May 2009, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority found it necessary to ban the operators of its trains, street cars and buses from using or carrying cell phones. This was in response to an incident in which an MBTA trolley operator ran a red light and hit another trolley, injuring 49 people. The trolley operator later admitted that he was sending a text message to his girlfriend at the time of the accident.

In another recent incident, a San Antonio VIA Metropolitan Transit driver was caught on video driving through rush hour traffic while texting. The driver slammed into the back of a sports utility vehicle, injuring the vehicle's driver. The video shows the driver texting for almost six minutes prior to the crash.

VIA reports that it recently fired three bus operators that were caught on video using their cell phones. One driver reportedly was caught texting at five different times during his route, and another was caught driving 65 miles an hour while texting.

Numerous studies have shown that the use of cell phones by vehicle operators is a dangerous distraction that has resulted in many collisions, personal injuries, and deaths.

In 2013, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System, distractions were a causal factor in 3,154 fatality-related crashes, which resulted in approximately 424,000 people being injured.

It's tempting to want to send a text message or answer a phone call while driving your bus. But your choice to text or answer your phone while driving could result in permanent and disastrous consequences. Before you take your attention off the road, remember...

Operating a bus + Using a wireless device = Disaster

What is a distraction? How can it lead to an accident?

Distracted driving is any non-driving activity in which a person engages that has the potential to distract him or her from the primary task of driving and increases the risk of crashing.

There are three types of distractions, any one of which can lead to an accident:

- Visual distractions are activities that cause a driver to take his eyes off the road - for example, answering a cell phone, reading a map, looking at a newspaper, looking at a GPS, etc.
- Manual distractions involve a driver removing his hands from the vehicle's steering wheel - for example, texting, tuning a radio or CD, applying make-up, shaving, etc.

- Cognitive distractions cause drivers to take their mind off the road – for example, using a hands-free or Bluetooth device, daydreaming, talking to passengers, etc.

Studies have shown that talking on the phone or texting while driving can affect a driver's ability to the same extent as driving drunk:

- Talking on a cell phone is equivalent to driving with a 0.08% Blood Alcohol Content Level, which is considered legally drunk in most states.
- Driving while using a cell phone reduces the amount of brain activity associated with driving by 37%.
- Almost 80% of crashes and 65% of near-crashes happen within 3 seconds of some form of driver distraction.
- Nearly 20% of all distracted driving fatalities involved cell phones, and
- Drivers who use hand-held devices are four times more likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves.

A study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute determined how certain cell phone activities increase the risk of getting into an accident. It found that the manual use of cell phones, such as dialing and texting, leads to a substantial increase in the risk of being involved in a crash or near crash. The VPI study shows that a driver who reaches for an electronic device while operating a heavy vehicle is nearly 7 times more likely to be involved in a crash, and a driver dialing a cell phone is 6 times more likely to be involved in a crash. Text messaging was associated with the highest risk of all cell-phone-related tasks. Texting while operating a heavy vehicle increase the operator's risk of a crash or a near crash by more than 23 times.

Regardless of the type of distraction, driving while distracted is a serious threat to safety on the road. As bus operators, you are professionals on the road and have more driving experience than typical drivers. You are well versed in state and federal driving laws and are trained in defensive driving techniques. Common sense tells you that looking down to send a text or answer your cell phone is irresponsible, incredibly dangerous, against your agency's policy, and could cost you your job.

Under Rule Chapter 14-90, Florida Administrative Code the use of non-agency authorized wireless devices is prohibited.

A Face Behind the Statistics of Distracted Driving – A Senseless Tragedy

Reggie Shaw was responsible for the deaths of two scientists as a result of texting in 2006. Shaw was a 19-year-old college student who was texting while driving his Chevy Tahoe to work. A small sedan approached in the opposite direction carrying two passengers who were prominent scientists on their way to ATK Launch Systems. While texting, Shaw crossed into the oncoming traffic and clipped the sedan, which spun out on the highway and was struck by a pickup that was carrying a two-ton payload. The scientists died instantly. Shaw was charged and convicted and received six months in jail. As a result of this crash, new laws were enacted in Utah: now, any driver who is convicted of this same offense could spend up to 15 years in jail.

Safety First

Safety is a transit system's number one priority. It is important to remember that, as a professional bus operator, you are responsible for your safety and the safety of your passengers, other vehicles, pedestrians, and your transit agency's property.

You should be familiar with your company's policy on wireless devices use. Personal electronic devices such as cell phones, MP3 players, and video games should be turned off and stowed off the driver's person and out of sight while the bus is in operation. These devices should never be used while the vehicle is in motion. Use of these devices should be restricted to times when the vehicle is parked.

Many other distractions can divert your attention away from safe driving and should not be conducted when your vehicle is in motion. Examples include:

- Eating or drinking
- Reading
- Completing paperwork
- Talking with passengers (drivers should avoid unnecessary communications with passengers)
- Reading maps or instructions on how to perform your job duties, getting directions
- Using the radio or other equipment

Common sense and personal responsibility are a major part of the solution. It's up to each and every person to make sure they "Put It Down" and pay attention to road. The risks are simply too high! Putting your cell phone down while driving will save lives and costs associated with crashes caused by distracted drivers. Since everyone is affected when drivers are distracted, everyone must be part of the solution.

It takes only a fraction of a second to be distracted while driving, which can have permanent and irrevocable consequences. **DON'T GET DISTRACTED OR IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!!** Be professional, responsible, and safe, and don't use wireless technologies while operating a public transit vehicle.