



Transit Employees Deserve Our Respect

By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott

Among the many unsung heroes of Covid, I've been especially impressed by the bus and trolley drivers who keep San Diego moving.

Doing their jobs, they help thousands of others get to theirs. They get students to class, shoppers to market, and elders to their doctors.

They also get a lot of abuse. The widespread erosion in public civility has also impacted decorum on our buses and trolleys. But unlike airline pilots, who have screeners and flight crews and air marshals to keep order, bus and trolley drivers are often on their own.

Consider their situation:

Every week, 500,000 to 600,000 passengers ride the trolleys and buses of the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System. MTS drivers come into close contact with nearly every passenger, none of whom are screened by security before boarding.

Like air travel, the vast majority of public transit trips in San Diego are pleasant and uneventful. But there are exceptions.

Drivers have been yelled at, slapped, punched, kicked, and spat upon. In the past two months, passengers have boarded trolleys and buses carrying hunting knives, guns (real and replicas), a hammer, an axe, and lighter fluid. One rider threatened a bus driver with a knife because the bus was late. Another assaulted a driver with a tree branch.

MTS drivers and employees must also break up fights, look out for arsonists setting fires in transit station trash cans, and put up with people who break windows by throwing rocks at buses and trolley cars.

The public employees responsible for getting us safely from one place to another shouldn't have to tolerate such abuse. And as society looks to public transit to address problems with traffic, parking, and climate change, we all have a growing stake in its success – whether or not we are riders.

These crimes are underreported by MTS drivers and staff who perhaps have accepted this conduct as just part of the job. I recently reached out to the MTS drivers' union to encourage their employees to step up and report incidents of abuse and assault. You can help: If you observe an incident, please report it and, if you can do so safely, record it on your phone. Our Office takes these cases seriously, and we will prosecute offenders.

MTS has recently taken steps to increase safety for riders and employees. It established security teams that travel the entire trolley system during service hours and added security staff at the

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busiest transit stations. Last year, MTS launched a new Bus Enforcement Special Team to provide extra security assistance to bus operators and passengers.

MTS has also made some changes to its security policies and practices, including increased training for staff, and updating its use-of-force policy. There are now security cameras installed on all MTS vehicles, and at all trolley stations.

As hiring becomes more difficult in all lines of work, we cannot afford to be without qualified, trained MTS employees. Their service to the public goes far beyond providing safe and reliable transportation. These public servants often help passengers who are overdosing on drugs, summoning paramedics and saving lives. MTS workers also try to help unsheltered passengers, bringing in outreach workers to connect them with the assistance they need. In addition, drivers and staff try to humanely deal with passengers who are intoxicated or mentally ill.

Let's work together to give our public transit workers the respect they deserve. They do a great job meeting our transportation needs, day and night, and they are immensely appreciated.

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