



WASHINGTON METROPOLITAN AREA TRANSIT AUTHORITY

Public Testimony in Support of SB 208

Criminal Law – Assault of a Public Transportation Service Provider – Penalties

Before the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

January 13, 2022

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today. For the record, my name is Paul Wiedefeld and I am the General Manager and CEO for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA). I am here to urge your strong support for Senate Bill 208.

I would like to start my testimony by publicly thanking the Maryland Department of Transportation for backing this critical legislation and also acknowledging the past sponsorship of this legislation by Senators Waldstreicher and McCray. We believe this bill will go a long way in improving the conditions and situations that many transit operators must deal with while attempting to provide basic transportation services in the State of Maryland.

When a transit operator is assaulted, it not only jeopardizes the safety of a WMATA employee, but fellow riders and the public at large. As noted by the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 689, these situations can occur on both our Metrorail and our Metrobus systems. Due to the closer interactions between customers and bus operators, Metro encounters most of these types of issues on its bus system. The offenses our operators encounter vary and include: spitting on operators; striking operators with closed fists, sticks, bricks and poles; assaults with deadly weapons (for example, guns and knives); fondling and attempting to undress female operators.

In just the past year in Maryland, our operators have had two encounters with individuals carrying firearms. In one instance, when a bus was stopped at an intersection away from a bus stop, a suspect kicked the bus door, demanding entry. When the operator kept the door closed, the suspect pointed a handgun at our operator. The operator was able to move the bus to a safe location and called for police assistance. In another instance, a passenger started a verbal altercation with one of our operators, came forward to approach the operator and opened his backpack to show the butt of a handgun. The suspect did exit the bus and police were contacted.

These altercations not only put our drivers in harm's way, they also put passengers on the bus and pedestrians and motorists on the public streets in jeopardy. We shudder to think of the injuries that may result from an operator losing control of a vehicle after being hit by a brick – or some other object – while operating his or her vehicle.

With my experience in the aviation industry, I can attest that heightened federal penalties for assaulting airline employees are appropriate and reflect the reality that public safety requires strong penalties to protect not only the front line employee but everyone relying on these essential workers. Laws such as what is proposed in SB 208 send an important message. Just as there are penalties for assaulting crews on airlines, tougher penalties for assaulting transit workers are necessary to protect the safety of not just our operators, but all of our passengers.

Metro has taken many actions to deter such assaults – all Metrobuses are equipped with security cameras and plexiglass shields to protect the operator. Additionally, we deploy undercover Metro Transit Police officers dedicated to riding buses and have additional scout cars patrolling troubled bus routes.

These actions have been helpful, but alone are not enough. In the past few years, we have experienced a significant increase in assaults on Metro employees. Specifically in Maryland, the number of assaults on station managers, train operators and bus operators has increased from a total of 16 in 2020 to 37 in 2021.

Assaults in Maryland		
Employee Type	2020	2021
Bus Operator	12	26
Train Operator	0	6
Station Manager	4	5

We firmly believe that the actions we are taking, coupled with the additional penalties provided by this legislation, will reduce these incidents in the future.

I thank the Maryland Department of Transportation and members of this Committee for providing leadership on this important issue and thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of SB 208.