

SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION LEADER

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Simulate hostage situations to test emergency plans

Imagine this scenario: One of your drivers pulls up to a bus stop where a group of students are standing with a middle-aged man. The driver, assuming the man is a parent, opens the doors of the vehicle. But in an instant, the man boards the bus and yells instructions at the driver. Are you ready to respond?

There is a wide array of possible hostage scenarios, all of which are hazardous to students and transporters. That's why it is critical that you and your transportation team take the issue seriously and plan carefully, said safety consultant Nancy Blackwelder.

Speaking at the recent Virginia Association for Pupil Transportation conference, Blackwelder said being prepared starts with having a comprehensive emergency plan in place — but it doesn't end there.

Instead, the Florida-based consultant said that it's critical to practice the plan under a variety of scenarios to find and resolve problems before a life-threatening situation occurs.

In assessing your preparedness, Blackwelder said, ask the following questions:

■ **Is there an emergency response checklist?**

Dispatchers should have easy access to an emergency response checklist of questions to ask the driver. The checklist is critical because it prevents drivers or dispatchers from overlooking essential information in the heat of the moment. The checklist can include questions such as:

- Does the assailant have a weapon?

- What does it look like?
- How many children are injured?
- Where is the bus going?
- Do you have an effective code? Often, a driver will not be able to provide lengthy, specific answers. In fact, the driver may not be able to alert the dispatcher to trouble at all, unless there is a preestablished code, Blackwelder said.

Practice using the code under a variety of hostage situations to ensure that it is flexible and covert enough to alert dispatch, not a hostage-taker.

■ **Do you have a trained media liaison?** News of a hostage situation will spread fast, and your phone lines will light up immediately. Be sure you have one individual who is trained to deal with the media and to keep parents informed. Inconsistent

or inaccurate information will make worried parents even more anxious.

■ **Are substitute staff members prepared?**

Don't plan a drill when all of your regular drivers and dispatchers are on duty. Keep in mind a real incident could easily

happen when a sub is filling in, Blackwelder said. Be sure all substitutes are also prepared for a hostage situation, because you never know when an emergency will occur.

■ **Can you work seamlessly with law enforcement?** Drills are a great way to see how law enforcement's plans and actions integrate with those of your district. Communication is a key issue.

■ **Do drivers have alternative alert signals?** Drivers need alternative ways to alert law enforcement to trouble when radios aren't available. One way to do this is to use a white flag attached to the driver's window, Blackwelder said. Normally, the flag is not visible to passing motorists, but in an

Key points

- Conduct drills to prepare regular, temp staff for various hostage scenarios.
- Test communications, collaboration with emergency responders.
- Assess drill outcomes to improve comprehensive emergency plan. ■

emergency, a driver could flip it out the window to get the attention of passing police officers.

■ **Can drivers aid law enforcement?** Once officers know something's wrong, if drivers have the opportunity to pull the bus off the road, they should target a place with lots of trees, shrubs or buildings. That will help police creep up on the vehicle without being detected, Blackwelder said.

Drivers should turn on the interior lights so police can see inside the vehicle. Drivers should also leave the windows down, so officers can

throw items into the bus, if necessary. Remind drivers that it may be prudent to move students away from the windows if law enforcement officials need to see clearly inside the vehicle to identify the hostage-taker.

By simulating various hostage situations, Blackwelder said, you can continually improve your emergency plan to make sure everyone is as prepared as possible for the unpredictable.

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