Most people know how urgent it is to use the restroom when you need to. They may not know that not properly relieving yourself can contribute to health problems such as urinary tract infections. Extended urine retention has recently been recognized as a major distractor, as bad as sleeplessness or alcohol use. Transit operators are aware of these risks, but sometimes it is impossible for operators to use a restroom. Operators avoid drinking water and even taking medications that affect urination because they know their needs may conflict with schedules.

Some health issues faced by transit operators—such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stress and unhealthy diets—have been given attention in the media and in contract negotiations between management and unions. Whether it is because there is not enough time built into route schedules to go to the restroom, no restrooms are located along the route, or available restrooms are unsanitary or unsafe, the use of restrooms by transit operators is a growing concern for operators. Adequate restroom access has not been effectively addressed until recently. Metro Transit has worked to secure adequate restroom facilities for their transit operators. In 1997,Metro Transit began to re-inspect some of the restroom facilities that it had established under contract or other agreement in the original 1980s push. This inspection became a regular routine. It allowed Metro Transit to reduce or eliminate payments for restrooms that were free to the public, no longer in business, or unsanitary. However, Metro Transit still believes in addresses restroom use, stating, “Do not make stops en route and leave the bus unattended except to use toilet facilities or to use a telephone to call the TCC or garage.”

While having restrooms use policies and procedures in place is critical, it is equally important that transit operators are aware of these appropriate restroom facilities and the protocol for using them. Metro Transit makes operators aware of the restroom facilities by having trainers point out the restroom facilities along the route during required route training.

Metro Transit also provides operators with an ‘Authorized Bus Operator Restroom Locations by Route’ sheet (below). This sheet informs the operators of the restroom facilities that are located along each route and the proper protocol for using those facilities (i.e. stop at desk to get key, no parking in front of building, restroom located on second floor, public restroom). Ensuring that operators are allowed to use the restroom, that facilities are adequate, and the operators are aware of the policy and the details is what makes Metro Transit’s restroom use policy a best practice in the transit industry.

Failing to allow transit operators to use the restroom when needed can cause many negative outcomes for the transit companies: an increase in agency health insurance premiums, absenteeism, low worker morale and high operator turnover rate. To remain health and effective at work, transit operators should have the ability and the authority to use restroom facilities whenever they need to, without the stress of worrying about maintaining their route schedule. Metro Transit and the union leaders at ATU Local 1005 have recognized this and taken the appropriate steps to make it a win-win for both operators and the company.

**References**

- Pelvic Floor Dysfunct 1997;8:340-3.
Debbie Barnes has been driving a bus in Washington, DC for eight years and enjoys nearly every aspect of it, most particularly meeting and greeting her passengers. She picks a different route every day, driving through every neighborhood in what she describes as “a beautiful city.”

The word “nearly” is used because, like many drivers, she knows about, are too filthy to even think about using. “And there is no one around to clean it on a regular basis.”

“The homeless people use it as a place to live,” she said, “And there is no one around to clean it on a regular basis.”

Barnes also said there are bus lines that have rest rooms at the end of the line unless those restrooms, like one she knows about, are too filthy to even think about using.

Ed Watt, the director of Safety and Health for the Transport Workers Union of America, blames management for tightening up the schedules, allegedly to save money.

“There used to be enough time for a bathroom break,” Watt said, but now if you are running late (a decades-old issue in Manhattan, where buses get stuck in the middle of traffic of one million other vehicles per day) there is not enough time built in to the schedules, leaving drivers to fend for themselves with “holding it.”

There are a number of reasons why drivers hold their urination, including: Preference to use their imaginations to deal with an issues that costs them their good health. And the insurance costs resulting from insufficient bathroom breaks will ultimately cost transit agencies far more than simply providing operators the time any human being needs for this.

As ATU grievance officers know, just because a clause (bathroom breaks or otherwise) is in the contract, doesn’t mean the employer will adhere to it.

The point is that transit employees should not have to resort to using their imaginations to deal with an issues that costs them their good health. And the insurance costs resulting from insufficient bathroom breaks will ultimately cost transit agencies far more than simply providing operators the time any human being needs for this.

The time has come to address the issue more aggressively.
The Transportation Learning Center is a national labor-management nonprofit partnership dedicated to strengthening workforce development in public transportation nationally and locally.

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