



**APTA SS-SEM-RP-020-25**

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**APTA Security and Emergency  
Management Working Group**

# Transit De-Escalation Policy and Training

**Abstract:** Assaults on transit workers have increased. This recommended practice provides transit agencies policy and training recommendations and resources to support transit workers in the de-escalation of confrontations with the goal of reducing transit worker assaults.

**Keywords:** de-escalation, operator assaults, training, policies

**Summary:** This recommended practice provides transit agencies with policy and training recommendations to support transit workers in de-escalating fare disputes and other confrontations to create a safer work environment and reduce transit worker assaults. This standard also addresses new Public Transportation Agency Safety Plans (PTASP) de-escalation requirements, which mandates some operators of public transportation systems that are recipients and subrecipients of FTA grant funds to expand de-escalation training and address safety risks.



## Foreword

The American Public Transportation Association is a standards development organization in North America. The process of developing standards is managed by the APTA Standards Program's Standards Development Oversight Council (SDOC). These activities are carried out through several standards policy and planning committees that have been established to address specific transportation modes, safety and security requirements, interoperability, and other topics.

APTA used a consensus-based process to develop this document, which is detailed in the [manual for the APTA Standards Program](#). This document was drafted in accordance with the approval criteria and editorial policy as described. Any trade name used in this document is information given for the convenience of users and does not constitute an endorsement.

This document was prepared by the APTA Security and Emergency Management Working Group (SEMWG) as directed by the APTA Security Standards Policy and Planning (SSPP) Committee.

This document represents a common viewpoint of those parties concerned with its provisions, namely transit operating/planning agencies, manufacturers, consultants, engineers, and general interest groups. The application of any recommended practices or guidelines contained herein is voluntary. APTA standards are mandatory to the extent incorporated by an applicable statute or regulation. In some cases, federal and/or state regulations govern portions of a transit system's operations. In cases where there is a conflict or contradiction between an applicable law or regulation and this document, consult with a legal adviser to determine which document takes precedence.

This is a new document.



## Table of Contents

Foreword .....	ii
Participants.....	iv
Introduction.....	iv
Scope and purpose .....	iv
<b>1. Overview .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Evolving Definition of Assault .....	1
1.2 Evidence of Increasing Operator Assaults .....	1
1.3 Possible Causes for Increase in Assaults .....	1
1.4 Triggers for Confrontations and Assaults .....	2
1.5 Importance of De-Escalation Training.....	2
1.6 New 2023 PTASP Requirement .....	2
<b>2. Developing an Agency's De-Escalation Policy .....</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1 Partnering with Internal and External Stakeholders.....	2
2.2 Identifying Program Resources.....	3
2.3 Documenting Policies and Practices .....	3
<b>3. Developing De-Escalation Training.....</b>	<b>4</b>
3.1 Training Audience .....	4
3.2 Learning Objectives .....	5
3.3 Training Methods.....	5
3.4 Training Frequency .....	5
3.5 Existing Training Resources .....	5
<b>4. 2023 PTASP Requirement for De-Escalation Training.....</b>	<b>6</b>
4.1 Applicability and compliance .....	6
References.....	7
Document history.....	7



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## Introduction

*This introduction is not part of APTA SS-SEM-RP-020-25, "Transit De-Escalation Policy and Training."*

APTA recommends the use of this document by:

- individuals or organizations that operate public transit systems;
- individuals or organizations that contract with others for the operation of public transit systems; and
- individuals or organizations that influence how public transit systems are operated (including but not limited to consultants, designers and contractors).

## Scope and purpose

The primary goal of this document is to provide information and recommendations for transit agencies to develop and implement de-escalation training, policies, and tools to create a safer work environment and reduce transit worker assaults.

# Transit De-Escalation Policy and Training

## 1. Overview

Over the last decade, national data demonstrates assaults against transit workers have increased significantly, affecting small and large transit agencies alike. The transit industry as well as federal, state, and local government partners are assessing and deploying mitigations and strategies to reduce transit worker assaults.

### 1.1 Evolving Definition of Assault

The government has broadened the scope of the term “assault” in recent years. As defined under 49 U.S.C. 5302, a transit assault is a circumstance in which an individual knowingly, without lawful authority or permission, and with intent to endanger the safety of any individual, or with a reckless disregard for the safety of human life, interferes with, disables, or incapacitates a transit worker while the transit worker is performing the duties of the transit worker. Importantly, assaults on transit workers include physical assaults (e.g., shoving, striking, or spitting on a transit worker) and non-physical assaults (e.g., verbal threats, intimidation, harassment, or other interference). The definition of a criminal assault differs state by state,

The National Transit Institute defines an assault as “Any physical attack, harmful or offensive contact, verbal threats of bodily harm, or attempts to cause injury or bodily harm by one person towards another.” This includes yelling, spitting, cursing, shoving, and other behaviors that do not directly constitute a direct physical attack.

Furthermore, the FTA’s National Transit Database (NTD) divides assault into two categories:

- Major Safety and Security Events, defined as an incident resulting in fatality or injury requiring medical transport
- Non-Major Safety and Security Events, which include any event not counted as a major event.

This standard uses the broadest definition of “assault” to include both physical and verbal altercations.

### 1.2 Evidence of Increasing Operator Assaults

Data from the FTA’s NTD shows a clear increase in assaults on transit workers. Since 2008, assaults have tripled. While this increase began around 2014, the industry experienced a sharp spike in 2021, following the end of many COVID-19 restrictions. While it may appear that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the transit worker assault problem, research by the Mineta Transportation Institute suggests that assaults began increasing in both North America and Europe prior to the pandemic.

This increase in assaults is a nationwide phenomenon, occurring at both large and small transit agencies. In 2008, 21 agencies reported major assault events. In 2022, 49 agencies across the country reported major assault incidents.

### 1.3 Possible Causes for Increase in Assaults

Transit worker assaults tend to arise from a set of common situations where confrontations originate. Fare disputes are the most frequent source of confrontations and assaults. Buses in particular experience the

highest rate of fare collection-related assaults, as operators are commonly directly responsible for fare collection. Drug and alcohol impairment and consumption is often a contributing factor in transit worker assaults. Other contributing factors in transit worker assaults have involved individuals affected by mental and behavioral health disorders, non-destination ridership, family and neighborhood disagreements, and behavioral issues (e.g., loud music, rowdy behavior).

## **1.4 Triggers for Confrontations and Assaults**

The circumstances previously addressed do not inherently cause a situation to escalate into a conflict. Often, a trigger causes the situation to elevate into a dispute and/or assault. Common triggers include disrespect (perceived and intended) towards transit workers or passengers, violation of social norms, and violation of agency rules or codes of conduct. In these situations, transit workers may see justification to react to a situation, which in turn may prompt an assault from the disruptive individual. De-escalation training, policies, and resources may help operators reduce the risk of confrontations in these and other circumstances.

## **1.5 Importance of De-Escalation Policies and Training**

There are several reasons why providing de-escalation policies and training is critical. De-escalation training can provide skills that promote a safe and secure environment for staff and riders. Effective de-escalation policies and training may help transit workers feel better prepared for aggressive interactions, increase morale and reduce turnover and attrition. Proper policies and training can help transit agencies decrease or avoid legal and financial costs and protect the agency's brand.

## **1.6 2023 PTASP Requirement**

In response to the increase in assaults on public transit operators, the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act ("Bipartisan Infrastructure Law") included provisions for the FTA to mandate new de-escalation training standards on certain agencies via a Public Transportation Agency Safety Plans (PTASP) update. Not all agencies are subject to PTASP requirements. Details related to 2023's PTASP de-escalation training requirements are detailed in Section 4.

# **2. Developing an Agency's De-Escalation Policy**

Agencies should develop an agency-wide de-escalation policy to ensure appropriate practices for an agency's transit environments and provide the foundation for subsequent training.

## **2.1 Partnering with Internal and External Stakeholders**

Transit agencies should collaborate with internal and external partners to develop appropriate and inclusive de-escalation policies and training. In particular, transit agencies should consult and collaborate with relevant employee labor organizations to address requirements, concerns, and best practices. Conversations with labor organizations will help ensure training and policies address varied employee work environments and may contribute towards conversations about related resources, such as resiliency training and mental health resources. For agencies subject to PTASP, the FTA requires agencies to cooperate with employee representatives in reviewing and updating the agency safety plan. De-escalation training and policy developers should also seek input from service delivery / operations, human capital, legal, and other applicable departments.

Agencies serving areas with significant unhoused populations and/or populations affected by mental and behavioral health challenges should partner with local programs, shelters, or interest groups to share resources and best practices and align policies and training.

Transit agencies may also work with law enforcement agencies to identify and incorporate applicable best practices.

## 2.2 Identifying Program Resources

Before developing agency de-escalation policies and training, agencies should assess requirements and allocate financial and employee resources to create, deploy, administer, and maintain the program. Resourcing considerations include the number of personnel who require training, instructor-related requirements (e.g., collective bargaining contract requirements), instruction format and technology requirements, number of training variations to account for different transit environments (e.g., bus, office space), and funding options (e.g., grants). Agencies should also consider resources needed to manage the administrative aspects of the program (e.g., scheduling classes, recording attendance, and auditing and reporting).

Agencies should consider developing a trainer pipeline to ensure the appropriate number of de-escalation trainers for the system. De-escalation trainers can be drawn from multiple sources, including external vendors, though collective bargaining agreements or contracts may require specific trainer sourcing.

## 2.3 Documenting Policies and Practices

Transit agencies should develop new and/or revise existing policies to account for de-escalation-related practices and procedures. Transit agencies should begin by examining existing policies and procedures to identify potential changes to minimize opportunities for escalation and maximize opportunities for de-escalation. Related policies to review include fare, drug and alcohol use, noise and music, pets, loitering, non-destination ridership policies as well as the code of conduct.

Transit agencies should also develop new and/or assess existing de-escalation policies to incorporate agency practices relevant to all positions and departments. An agency's de-escalation policy should address the following subjects:

**Conduct a Safety Risk Assessment:** Transit agencies should conduct a risk assessment that evaluates transit worker safety and assault risks and identifies mitigations and practices to implement. The assessment's mitigation recommendations should address equipment needs (e.g., mirrors, barriers, signage, security cameras) in addition to de-escalation practices and training. Transit agencies subject to FTA's Public Transportation Agency Safety Plans (PTASP) must conduct a safety risk assessment, identify safety risk mitigations or strategies and provide information to FTA on how they are assessing, mitigating and monitoring transit worker assault risks to comply with *General Directive 24-1: Required Actions Regarding Assaults on Transit Workers*.

**Detail Assault Reporting Procedures:** Transit agencies should develop, assess, and corroborate all responsibilities and procedures related to reporting assaults. Agencies should consider transit workers the front line for defusing and de-escalating potentially hostile situations to the best of their abilities. If they are unable to de-escalate an incident, employees should have multiple options to report an on-going or finished incident. Additionally, transit agencies should encourage staff to report de-escalated incidents to help evaluate the effectiveness of de-escalation techniques. Transit agencies should clearly communicate assault reporting and response procedures.

**Encourage Reporting of Assaults:** Transit agencies should not only empower employees to report both physical and verbal assaults, they should also encourage, if not require, reporting. Agencies should regularly remind transit workers of the importance of reporting assaults, clearly describe reporting procedures, and implement a strong support structure from the agency, law enforcement, community partners, and other organizations (e.g., labor organizations). Furthermore, agencies

should share assaults and de-escalation-related incidents and data with FTA, law enforcement, relevant departments, and other agencies. Ideally, agencies should inform employees of the results from their reporting to build confidence in the process.

**Detail Assault Response Procedures:** Transit agencies should develop, assess, and confirm all responsibilities and procedures related to responding to reported assaults. Many law enforcement agencies are also exploring de-escalatory practices and policies. Several agencies have created “Critical Incident Support Teams” that can quickly respond to incidents like assaults and have dedicated de-escalation training. Beyond helping address aggressive situations, these teams can also help provide operators mental health and other support needs following an incident. Agencies may explore leveraging critical incident stress debriefing methodology or mental health providers for affected staff.

**Identify Related Security Measures and Needs:** Transit agencies should identify and incorporate existing equipment and measures (e.g., mirrors, barriers, signage, security cameras) that support de-escalation and assault prevention policies and training. Transit agencies should also identify gaps and needs and develop a plan to address identified shortfalls.

**Collect and Analyze Data:** Agencies should assign an organization responsibility for processing and analyzing data on assaults and training. Data should include logistical information (e.g., time, location, transit mode) as well as de-escalation strategies employed and the results. By building and analyzing a detailed dataset, agencies can better understand trends, reinforce successful de-escalation strategies, withdraw unsuccessful practices, and proactively deploy deterrents and/or support infrastructure.

#### **Transit Use Case**

The Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) employs a Critical Incident Support Team (CIST) to better support frontline workers when they experience major or traumatic incidents like assaults. This team leverages best practices from emergency responders to help respond to assaults, collisions, and other traumatic incidents. Central dispatch typically summons a CIST. After the incident, a CIST helps the impacted operator process and recover from the incident so they can return to work.

### **3. Developing De-Escalation Training**

When building a de-escalation training program, agencies should consider safety risk assessment findings, intended audience, frequency of training and retraining, and costs. Transit agencies may choose to develop and conduct training via in-house or contracted resources. Agencies may implement in-person, virtual, or hybrid training, but in-person training is typically most effective. Agencies should tailor training and scenarios to employees’ positions and work environments, using data from prior reporting to develop realistic scenarios.

Incorporating agency success stories, case studies or other positive examples into de-escalation training concretely demonstrates the value of the training. Success stories show employees that their agency’s de-escalation policies and practices work and that employees’ roles and responsibilities are critical to maintaining a safe and secure transit system for employees and passengers alike. Likewise, sharing lessons learned helps employees avoid repeated missteps and reinforces the importance of de-escalation in aggressive situations.

#### **3.1 Training Audience**

All transit workers should take de-escalation training. Transit agencies should consider transit workers – especially bus operators – highest priority due to their direct exposure to customers and potentially aggressive interactions.

Following frontline operators, other priority groups for de-escalation training include customer service,



maintenance, service, and security workers (e.g., to strengthen interactions with passengers and respond to feedback), dispatch (e.g., to understand the significance of transit workers' reports of incidents), and field supervisors, managers, and executive leadership (to strengthen connections with front-line transit workers and demonstrate empathy). Transit agencies should also require relevant contractors to receive de-escalation training that meets agency standards.

## **3.2 Learning Objectives**

Transit agencies should consider incorporating the following learning objectives in de-escalation training:

- Identify situations, conditions, and behaviors that may indicate where escalation, conflict, and assaults may occur
  - Training material and scenarios for this objective should address body language and tone of voice, signs of alcohol and drug use, common circumstances (e.g., time of day), and routes or areas where assaults are more common.
- Understand the transit agency's policies, practices, and procedures for responding to aggressive behavior, de-escalating hostile situations, and reporting assaults
- Understand transit workers' roles and responsibilities in responding to and reporting aggressive behavior
  - Training material for this objective should address disciplinary or other harmful consequences of escalating situations.
- Understand de-escalation practices, behaviors and options for responding to and proactively avoiding aggressive behavior
  - Training material and scenarios for this objective should address the importance of providing positive response, asking questions, and explaining the "why."
- Understand concepts and resources to strengthen individual resilience
  - Training material for this objective should link to agency resiliency training and provide information on agency mental health and related benefits.

## **3.3 Training Methods**

Transit agencies may use a variety of training methods and formats to deliver de-escalation training curriculum. See APTA-SS-SRM-RP-005-12, "Security Awareness Training for Transit Employees" for information on common training methodologies and formats.

## **3.4 Training Frequency**

Agencies should provide all transit workers with initial de-escalation training during or shortly after onboarding. Furthermore, agencies should consider providing refresher training as needed, such as after an incident or at regular intervals. Transit agencies should continually assess and update de-escalation training to reflect evolving changes to agency and community practices, trends, requirements, and environmental conditions. Refresher training will maintain transit workers' confidence in their ability to respond to, de-escalate and report aggressive situations.

## **3.5 Existing Training Resources**

Transit partners offer a range of existing de-escalation training resources. Existing resources cover a range of de-escalation methodologies (e.g., the concept of Listen, Apologize, Solve, Thank (LAST)) that transit agencies should evaluate before deploying. Some training resources are free, while others may require purchase. Some existing resources provide train-the-trainer offerings.

Transit agencies should explore existing training resources and offerings to identify material that best suits their needs. Existing training resources include:

**FTA De-Escalation Training Resource Directory:** This online directory provides de-escalation training resources and points of contact from state safety oversight agencies, bus and rail transit providers, state departments of transportation, FTA, and other organizations (e.g., transit associations).

**National Transit Institute (NTI) Assault Awareness and Prevention for Transit Operators:** This free online course provides bus operators knowledge and skills to reduce the likelihood of incidents escalating into assaults. NTI offers a supplemental train-the-trainer offering for transit agency instructional staff to deliver the course to operators within their agencies.

## **4. 2023 PTASP Requirement for De-Escalation Training**

The 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act required the FTA to mandate new de-escalation training standards on transit agencies that are subject to FTA's Public Transportation Agency Safety Plans (PTASP). As a result, in 2024, FTA published an update to the PTASP regulation that requires agencies subject to PTASP requirements to provide transit workers de-escalation training to continue qualifying for federal funds. Not all agencies are covered by PTASP requirements.

### **4.1 Applicability and compliance**

The updated PTASP regulation applies to all operators of public transportation systems that are recipients and subrecipients of FTA grant funds. Agencies that must meet PTASP de-escalation training requirements are required to have an agency safety plan, receive FTA grant funding, and serve one or more large urban areas.

The PTASP de-escalation training requirement requires agencies to develop a comprehensive safety promotion program that includes de-escalation training for maintenance personnel, operations personnel, and personnel directly responsible for safety. Furthermore, the PTASP update requires agencies to cooperate with employee representatives in reviewing and updating the agency safety plan.

**APTA SS-SEM-RP-020-25**  
**Transit De-Escalation Policy and Training**

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## Document history

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