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APTA Security Risk Management
Working Group

Identifying Suspicious Behavior in Mass Transit

Abstract: This recommended practice establishes minimum guidelines for identifying suspicious behavior in mass transit.

Keywords: human trafficking, identifying, security, suspicious, suspicious behavior, terrorism, transit

Summary: Transit systems by nature are open and easily accessible by the public—and thereby are easily accessible by terrorists and criminals. It is impractical for transit agencies to use the screening practices used in airports. Terrorists and criminals could be of any race, color, gender, religion, ethnicity, national origin or age. Selective screening of passengers based only on these characteristics is profiling and is unconstitutional and unlawful. An acceptable method of securing transit agencies is to monitor and identify suspicious behavior. This recommended practice provides transit staff guidance and procedural guidelines for identifying suspicious behavior and potential criminal activity. It includes criteria for identifying potential crimes in progress, as well as basic behavioral characteristics of possible criminals and/or terrorists.

Scope and purpose: This document provides transit employees guidelines on recognizing suspicious behavior. It is applicable to all transit agencies, regardless of size or mode, and is not intended to substitute for federal, state or local regulatory requirements. This document offers a baseline set of recommendations to assist transit agencies in their implementation of behavioral analysis. The scope of this document is limited to guidance for identifying suspicious behavior, thereby assisting law enforcement in taking appropriate actions that mitigate the risk of criminal activity. This document does not provide guidance on steps the transit agency should employ to respond to or report suspicious behavior.

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 this 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.

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Introduction

This introduction is not part of APTA SS-SRM-RP-009-09, "Identifying Suspicious Behavior in Mass Transit."

APTA recommends the use of this document by:

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

Summary of recommendations

- Train employees in potential preparatory actions for terrorism or criminal activity and/or tendencies.
- Write policies and procedures employees should follow for preestablished reporting procedures.
- Develop, maintain and update the security-related training curriculum for all employees.

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1. How to identify suspicious behavior

This document demonstrates how identifying suspicious behavior or activity is a continuous, iterative and logical process.

Transit employees should be aware of and familiar with their surroundings and the typical behavior of transit users. If the behavior or activity of a particular individual or group is unusual and arouses suspicion, then transit employees should actively assess the situation, especially when the security of the system is in question. Transit employees should remain aware that suspicious behavior is not always an indicator that the subject is a potential perpetrator. For example, human trafficking victims may also exhibit nervousness or other suspicious behavior.

Transit employees should attempt to collect as much information as possible to determine if the situation warrants additional attention but should not act as law enforcement. Employees must also exercise caution, good judgment and common sense to avoid compromising their own safety while collecting information. If the situation has the potential to disrupt service or harm others, then the transit employee(s) should take actions to control the situation according to the transit agency's preestablished policies and procedures.

1.1 Look for out-of-the-ordinary situations

A security-aware transit employee understands typical behavior on the transit system and therefore is more likely to notice when something is out of the ordinary. Suspicious behavior can manifest in many forms. Most notable are actions indicative of planning, preparing and/or performing surveillance for terrorist or other criminal activity, which can occur several weeks or even years in advance of the activity. Individuals with malicious intent may be present among transit travelers on a regular basis to analyze the operating procedures of the transit agency. Transit employees need to examine behavior to distinguish suspicious individuals from regular passengers.

Table 1 lists actions related to potential terrorism or criminal preparation. A person exhibiting multiple actions in the table is an indicator of suspicious behavior that should be given special attention and assessed as a potential threat. When potential criminals and/or terrorists are working in groups, they most likely will attempt to maintain covert ties. These ties may be in the form of nonverbal communication, such as eye, head and hand gestures. Subjects may also use mobile phones to communicate while in the same area.

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TABLE 1
 Potential Preparatory Actions for Terrorism or Criminal Activity

Taking photos of critical infrastructure	Working in groups
Taking notes/drawing diagrams	Avoiding eye contact
Inquiring about security/operations	Revisiting the same location
Not actually using the transit system	Immediately fleeing the area when noticed
Boundary probing	Weak cover story if questioned

1.2 Analyze subjects for nervous tendencies

During the preparation and execution phase of terrorist or criminal activity, the subject(s) may be nervous. Nervous tendencies are also indicators of suspicious behavior that transit personnel can use to assess passengers. **Table 2** lists some nervous tendencies suspects may demonstrate. These tendencies may increase when a subject is near uniformed security personnel, canine (K9) units or security checkpoints.

TABLE 2
 Nervous Tendencies

Trembling	Continuously scanning the area	Aggressively biting nails
Unusual perspiration	Heavy breathing	Eyes wide open
Fidgeting	Rubbing hands	Pacing
Clock-watching	Repetitively touching face	Exaggerated yawning
Avoiding uniformed officers	Exaggerated emotions such as crying or laughing to self	Other physical reactions that are not typical in the transit environment

Nervous tendencies may not necessarily be threatening in nature, but they are cause for concern regardless. For example, a person with unusual perspiration and heavy breathing who is repetitively touching his face and continuously scanning the area may be looking for help because he is suffering from a heart attack or other medical emergency. A transit employee should pay attention to any person exhibiting these tendencies.

Criminals and terrorists may not be nervous but may instead intensely focus on completing their objective. This type of threatening focus may manifest itself in isolation. The subjects may have cold, penetrating stares or may be unresponsive to questions or authoritative commands.

1.3 Look for signs of execution

Criminals who go unnoticed during their surveillance stage will likely proceed to the next step and execute their plan. Transit employees need to be aware of passengers or people on transit property who exhibit signs of potential execution of criminal and terrorist plans. **Table 3** lists these signs.

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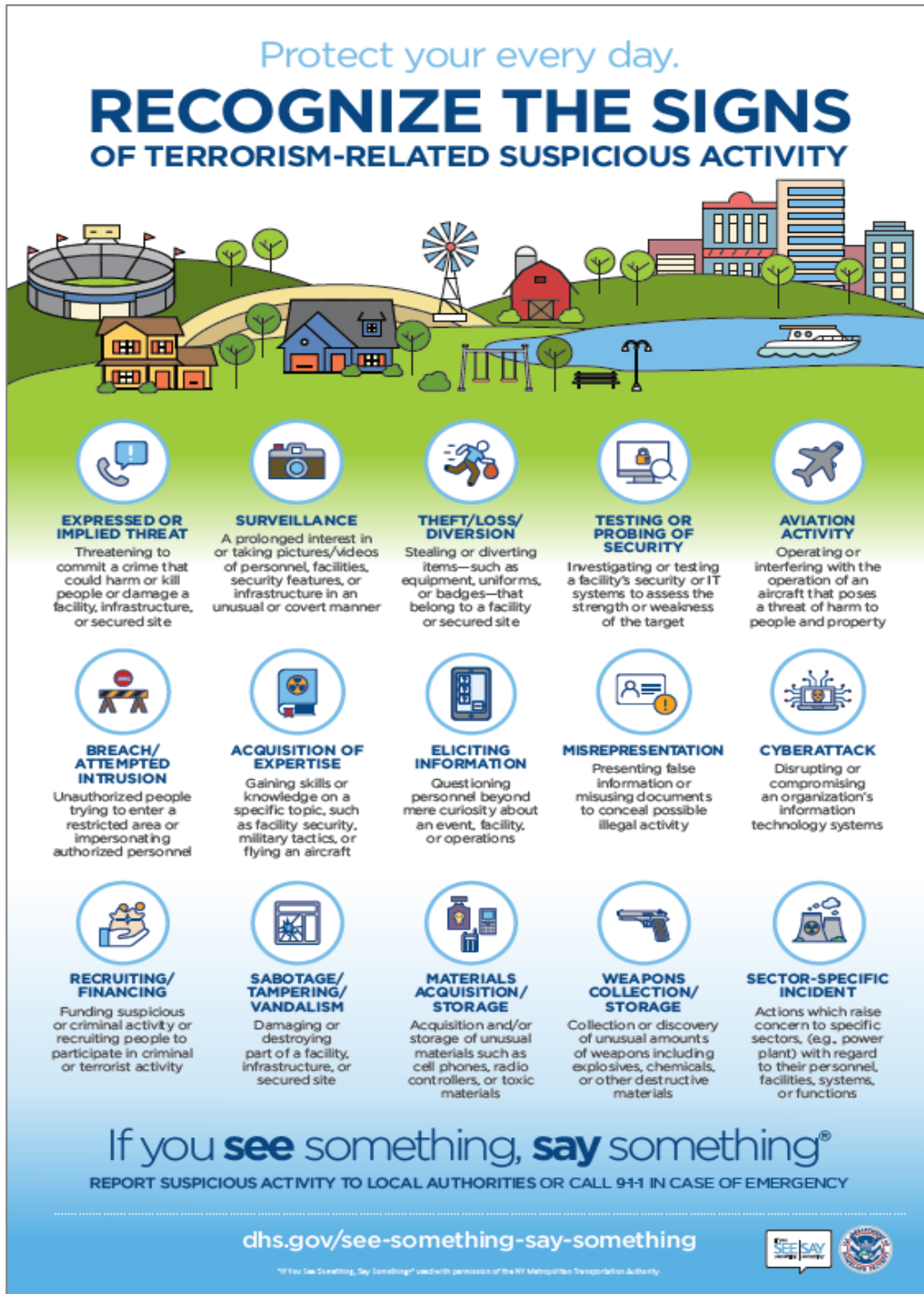
TABLE 3
Signs of Potential Terrorist or Criminal Execution Activity

Inappropriate clothing for the season	Repeatedly patting upper body
Exposed wires	Appearing in a trance-like state
Excessive fidgeting, clock-watching and area-scanning	Appearing to be in disguise
Rigid posture with minimal body movement, arms close to sides	Drastic and sudden change of appearance (e.g., shaved body hair, increased mass from explosive vest)
Unresponsive, distant and/or inattentive	

1.4 Terrorism-related suspicious behavior

Recognizing potential terrorist activity is a top concern for transit agencies. Various resources dedicated to identifying and preventing terrorism are listed in Section 3 of this recommended practice. **Figure 1** describes common suspicious behaviors with a focus on terrorism.

FIGURE 1
 Recognize the Signs of Terrorism-Related Suspicious Activity



1.5 Human trafficking–related suspicious behavior

Human trafficking can be defined as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing or soliciting of a person for labor or services through force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of

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involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, commercial sex acts or slavery. Within the United States, human traffickers use national, state and local transportation infrastructure, systems and modes. Human trafficking and the other criminal activities that accompany it pose a threat to transit system customers and personnel.

Traffickers often use transit systems to seek out and manipulate potential victims. Victims may also use transit systems as a means to escape a trafficking situation. Situationally aware transit agency employees are therefore uniquely positioned to identify potential trafficking or to assist victims. Both perpetrators and victims may exhibit suspicious behavior.

Table 4 lists potential behaviors of human trafficking perpetrators:

TABLE 4
Signs of Potential Human Trafficking Perpetrators

Repeatedly approaching different transit users, especially when offering work or focusing on users who seem vulnerable	Verbally or physically abusing their companion, or treating them in a demeaning way
Controlling companions' passports, identification, money or other valuables	Inability to explain a clear and believable relationship to their companion
Not allowing adult companions to speak for themselves	Preventing transit employees from approaching their companions

Table 5 lists potential behaviors of human trafficking victims:

TABLE 5
Indicators of Potential Human Trafficking Victims

Vulnerable individuals appearing to travel alone with potential trafficker actually nearby	Offering sex, other services or goods in exchange for money near a transit station
Appearing malnourished or sleep-deprived, or with poor hygiene	Few or no possessions, or noticeably lower-quality possessions than others in their party
Inability to articulate logical travel plans	Fear or anxiety, especially near their travel companion
Acknowledging having a pimp or needing to make a "quota"	Bruises or other injuries
Vulnerable individuals appearing to seek escape	

2. Reaction to suspicious behavior

2.1 Observe and report subjects

If a transit agency employee observes any of the actions described in Section 1, or notes other activities that increase suspicion, they should engage one of the following options, depending on the transit agency's preestablished policies and procedures. Transit agencies should carefully consider and clearly establish when it is appropriate for their employees to interact with someone who is acting in an out-of-the-ordinary or suspicious manner.

It is important for transit agency employees to recognize that not everyone exhibiting suspicious behavior is a potential perpetrator, and these passengers may even be in distress or needing assistance. Employees should use their judgment to assess the level of suspicion and appropriate response.

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For instance, at a less severe level of suspicion, a man waiting around on a platform and repeatedly not boarding trains could be engaged in surveillance, or he may just be waiting for his spouse to arrive. A man wearing an overcoat in the summertime and carrying a bag with wires sticking out of it, however, is a more severe level of suspicion. In the first example, it may be appropriate from a customer service standpoint to interact with the passenger. In the second example, requesting immediate police response would likely be the more appropriate option. When and how to interact with people on the transit system may also be affected by the duties of an employee's job function and any labor agreements in effect.

Below are three options for how employees may interact with passengers exhibiting suspicious behavior:

- **Option 1:** Observe and assess reactions while engaging in casual conversation with the person in question.
- **Option 2:** Report observations to a supervisor or security and law enforcement personnel, and continue observing.
- **Option 3:** Record video or capture photographs if it is possible to do so safely.

Asking open-ended questions may put the individual on the defensive, so it is important for employees to approach the situation with care and offer customer-oriented body language and a respectful tone. For example, if the person exhibiting suspicious behavior is wearing a heavy coat in warm weather, the employee could say, "That's a nice coat. Where did you get that?" Or if a suspicious person is taking notes at the transit agency's facilities, the employee could ask where the person is going or if he needs any help. These open-ended questions give the employee a chance to analyze the person in question's verbal and nonverbal response, including body language. **Table 6** gives a sample list of questions that a transit employee can use when interacting with people on the transit system whose behavior has not risen to the level of being suspicious.

TABLE 6
Open-Ended Questions

How are you doing today?
How can I help you?
Can I help you navigate our system?
How do you think they'll do? (If wearing sports paraphernalia)
What are you working on? (If taking notes or drawing)
Can I help you find something? (If boundary-probing)

If the person is indeed a criminal or terrorist, they may attempt to deceive the employee and may become increasingly evasive or aggressive. **Table 7** lists nonverbal indicators of deception that employees should be familiar with when interacting with people acting suspiciously.

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TABLE 7
 Indicators of Potential Deception

Increased nervous activity	Clears throat excessively	Avoidance of eye contact
Voice becomes higher in pitch	Yawns excessively	Sweating
Ambiguous or evasive response	Adam’s apple jump	Stammers
Gestures that do not match the verbal message	Fast eye-blink rate	Facial flushing
Stalled/delayed response	Pulsing carotid artery	Changes in temperament

If suspicious behavior is detected or suspected, transit agency employees should follow their agency’s preestablished reporting procedures to notify law enforcement and/or agency security immediately and remain available to assist the investigation. Law enforcement procedures will determine further actions. For example, depending on the circumstances, law enforcement may have the right to search and/or question the person.

3. Training

Every transit employee is responsible for maintaining system safety and security per the agency’s preestablished policies and procedures. Each agency should develop, maintain and update a mandatory security-related training curriculum for all employees, including training on recognizing suspicious behaviors.

Extensive training is available to the industry through various outlets, including TSA’s First Observer Plus. These resources may include courses, audiovisual materials or printed materials (such as **Figure 1** from Section 1.4, available from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security). See the APTA recommended practice “Security Awareness Training for Transit Employees” for further information on recommended training requirements, practices, curricula and resources.

3.1 General training

Several federal agencies, transit associations and other groups offer general security awareness training with segments on identifying suspicious behaviors that are applicable to a broad variety of transit modes. See APTA’s recommended practice “Security Awareness Training for Transit Employees” for a list of potential training resources.

3.2 Terrorism-focused training

A number of federal and state agencies offer counterterrorism training to transit agencies. Public transit agencies may contact their area’s fusion center to learn about available counterterrorism training. Likewise, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security offers a number of training resources. In particular, Transportation Security Administration offerings include:

- **Exercise Information System (EXIS) workshops and tabletop exercises:** EXIS sessions help operators examine the efficacy of their security plans/procedures and provide specific security improvement options.
- **First Observer Plus™:** The First Observer Plus program provides transportation professionals with the knowledge needed to recognize suspicious activity possibly related to terrorism, guidance in assessing what they see, and a method for reporting those observations.
- **Observe, Assess, Respond training videos:** These are free, on-demand videos that may be incorporated into a training curriculum.

3.3 Human trafficking–focused training

Many transit agencies take actions to combat human trafficking by issuing leadership statements, developing reporting protocols, conducting public awareness campaigns and training their employees. Organizations providing human trafficking–focused training for transit agency operators include the following:

- **Department of Homeland Security:** DHS’s Blue Campaign is a national public awareness campaign designed to educate the public, law enforcement and other industry partners to recognize the indicators of human trafficking and how to appropriately respond to possible cases. The campaign offers a variety of educational resources and can also connect transit operators with local organizations for additional materials. For more information see www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign.
- **Department of Transportation:** DOT’s “Put the Brakes on Human Trafficking” campaign was formed with input from transportation and travel stakeholders across modes and sectors. The campaign includes a suite of anti–human trafficking trainings, publications and other materials ready for distribution for the aviation, transit, rail and motorcoach industries, as well as publications and other materials ready for distribution. For more information see www.transportation.gov/stophumantrafficking.
- **Truckers Against Trafficking:** Truckers Against Trafficking is an international organization dedicated to combatting trafficking in surface transportation modes. The organization provides self-directed trainings and training resources applicable to transit modes including busing and school transportation. For more information see truckersagainstrafficking.org/bus-training/.

Related APTA standards

APTA SS-SRM-RP-005-09, “Security Awareness Training for Transit Employees”

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U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “What Is Suspicious Activity?” dhs.gov/see-something-say-something/what-suspicious-activity

U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “If You See Something, Say Something®” Recognize the Signs Infographic. dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/18_0701_seesay_indicatorinfographic.pdf

Definitions

profiling: Assuming that a person has criminal tendencies based on that person’s race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation or dress. Unlawful profiling may result in harassment charges and lawsuits and is illegal.

reasonable suspicion: A legal standard in U.S. law; suspicion that a person has been, is or is about to be engaged in criminal activity based on specific and articulable facts and inferences.

standard operating procedures: Preestablished and practiced procedures to enact during specific circumstances.

surveillance: The act of collecting information by observation.

suspicion: A feeling of distrust in an individual or group because of some hint or suggestion of criminal motives. Suspicion should arise when something concerning safety or an individual is out of the ordinary.

suspicious behavior: Behavior that raises feelings of wariness or distrust because it is out of the ordinary for the time, place or circumstances. Increased suspicion is more than a hunch but less than the reasonable suspicion required to detain a person or group. Suspicion should be based on behavior and not profiling based on race, color, age, gender, religion, ethnicity or national origin.

transit employee: Personnel employed directly by the transit agency or through contracts. This includes but is not limited to operators, facilities maintenance workers, customer service representatives, receptionists, station managers, fare collectors, security guards, contracted security guards, local security not directly associated with the transit agency, and sworn law enforcement assigned to or patrolling transit agency assets.

Abbreviations and acronyms

EXIS Exercise Information System

NATSA North American Transportation Services Association

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Summary of document changes

- Added sections on human trafficking.

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