

Suspicion and Threat Communications Procedures for Ground Transportation Drivers and Dispatchers

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In today's world, some of the major risks that face drivers, passengers and the public come from the potential for intentional criminal or terrorist acts by other human beings. It is important therefore to train drivers, dispatchers and staff to recognize and respond to these threats. These threats include robbery and other direct attacks on drivers, hostage taking, vehicle hijacking and the use of vehicles to carry out or plan crimes including terrorist acts. This latter threat must be considered a realistic possibility. As most of us know, mass transit has been a frequent terrorist target. Then in 2004, the FBI warned of specific al-Qaeda plans to use for-hire vehicles for bombs, and warned of vehicles that would not attract as much suspicion as a limousine or van, but would have enough space to hold a sizable bomb. Moreover, many transportation vehicles have greater access to certain streets, lanes and parking spaces, further increasing appeal to potential criminals. However, by far the leading threat to certain categories of for-hire drivers and especially taxicab drivers is the threat from robberies and other assaults, most frequently by passengers. The similarity with mass transit here is that a terrorist threat would also likely be on-board, posing as a legitimate passenger.

Even where the threat to the driver is an obvious intruder on the vehicle, as in a possible hijacking or hostage situation, the intruder will likely instruct the driver to behave normally. This may allow the driver to actually speak with the dispatcher during the crime. At our training and consulting firm, we refer to this portion of driver security training as "The Drill," referring to the importance we place on practicing the communication and action procedures before hand, so they are second nature when employed in a real situation.

It is appropriate to devote an entire module on Driver Security to these topics and other related topics in training courses for drivers and dispatchers. Such a driver-training module is appropriate for all transportation modes, be it public transit and paratransit, taxicabs, limousines, shuttles and touring vehicles, etc. More importantly, such training is as critical for dispatchers as it is for drivers.

There are many topics important to driver security. Drivers should watch for and think ahead about how they will deal with diverse potential threats. In this article, we focus on a few emergency radio procedures.

Communications Procedures and Emergency Codes and Equipment

It is critical to any driver security program to have procedures in place for drivers to notify dispatchers of potentially dangerous situations. In the case of driver security notifications, these procedures should in all cases include voice codes for radio / telecommunications so as not to alert the suspicious passenger or criminal(s). Where possible, these voice codes should be supplemented with other signaling devices. There two primary security situations for drivers to alert dispatchers are if:

1. They have a suspicious situation on-board (or “**code 6**” in our examples)
2. They are experiencing a life-threatening emergency on-board the vehicle (or “**code 7**” in our examples).

To be clear, here we are only discussing potential threats to the driver from passengers in the vehicle, and also life threatening emergencies to the driver from persons in or near the vehicle. We are not discussing other emergency procedures at this point such as passenger illnesses, vehicle emergencies or accidents or other similar emergencies that you need procedures.

One of the most important elements to using codes in these two situations is that the threat is likely in the vehicle with the driver and therefore secretive codes that will not alert the criminal are critical. In addition, it is critical that the use of these codes flow naturally within a framework of other radio and/or digital communication codes you use, such as the codes companies frequently use to report departing a pickup or the loading of passengers; even if the company does not typically report departing a pickup or loading passengers it will not likely appear unusual to do so.

For example, a “Code 2” at a company might refer to a street hail or flag down (taxi) and “Code 3” might refer to a call at a hotel. Both drivers and dispatchers use such codes as shorthand. By fitting seamlessly, the driver can merely replace one code for another, turning what would otherwise be a loading code to a suspicious passenger code.

Sample procedures are included below for these situations to assist companies that do not have any procedures with a starting point, or if they do have such procedures, to assist them in reviewing them for potential improvements. Some elements of these procedures are provided in the TCS driver-training course for new drivers. (Note: In locations where multiple companies attend the same introductory training course, such as is the case with City provided training, only general information can be provided in that driver course, because different companies have different emergency equipment, different codes, and different specifics to their procedures that cannot possibly be covered in the driver training program. It is therefore essential that companies provide additional training to drivers in the specifics of their program.)

There are many factors to consider when developing your security communication procedures. These include the availability and features of your equipment such as voice radio, digital communications and in-vehicle computer dispatch terminals, vehicle location systems such as those using GPS (Global Positioning System), and vehicle emergency buttons, etc. Another important device for prevention and solving crimes is in-vehicle cameras. Your procedures will also be based on the types of service you provide (e.g., limo, paratransit, bus or taxi) and other factors. The following example covers a radio procedure without an automatic vehicle location system, which should be the foundation for preparation in case automated equipment is not working. You then build on the system by adding technological sophistication in place of the manual methods wherever it is available.

1. Reporting Loads, *Especially Street Hails and Suspicious Passengers*

Reporting vehicle loads, especially at suspicious locations or suspicious passengers is an important security precaution. Frequently loads are reported routinely anyway so the dispatcher can monitor service levels or because of contract requirements. The reporting of these loads should include a pickup location or perhaps a location zone number or code, and a destination address or zone that will be repeated back by the dispatcher, again utilizing radio codes. Street hails or flags could, for example, be called as code 2, with major hotels called in as code 3. Make sure drivers are aware that although street hails are the *most* dangerous calls, *any call can be dangerous*.

Example:

Driver of 24: “Unit 24 Loading Code 2, 2nd Av at Pecan Street”

Dispatcher: “10-4, unit 24, 2 Av / Pecan, where to?”

Driver: “24, to 2400 block, Jensen Drive.

Dispatcher: “24, 10-4.”

Keeping records on such calls can be invaluable in the event of trouble. Recording this information on audio recorders on the radio frequency is therefore highly recommended.

2. Code 6 = Suspicious Passenger(s) or Situation on Board

Drivers should be encouraged to utilize code 6 if they are suspicious of a passenger or the circumstances on the vehicle, substituting this code for any radio or digital code that would signal a routine load. If instead they have a definite life-threatening emergency on the vehicle, they will instead utilize code 7. In both cases, the driver reports the location and destination along with the code 6. For example, a radio transmission procedure might be “Unit 24, Code 6 at 2nd Av at Pecan Street, headed to 2400 block, Jensen Drive.” Note how similar this transmission would be to a typical load or departure communication to the dispatcher, yet the driver is also communicating either a suspicious situation or a life-threatening situation.

The emphasis with Code 6 is *prevention*. Drivers should be trained and encouraged to report code 6’s emphasizing that the Code 6 should not become a Code 7. Usually it is *too late* when an incident is Code 7, or they may not be able to report it at all.

When either code is reported, the dispatcher should respond similarly to the way he or she typically would in a normal situation so as not to alert vehicle occupants that anything unusual has been heard. The dispatcher should also document the unit number, the time and location, and destination given. The dispatcher’s reply to the code 6 or 7 unit should confirm for the entire fleet to hear with the driver’s location and destination,

clearly indicating however the code 6, such as “10-4 unit 24, code 6 at 2nd Av at Pecan Street, headed to 2400 block, Jensen Drive, code 6.” If it is possible to digitally communicate this to the fleet but not the troubled unit, this should also be undertaken.

Other drivers, having been trained in these procedures, will hear the mention of the code 6 by the dispatcher responding to the driver, and be on the lookout for the vehicle, especially in the reported vicinity of the vehicle. Companies with effective training in these procedures will witness a strong response on the part of other drivers in their fleet. Drivers should be also be trained that if they locate a “code 6” unit to follow it without interfering with the trip; and if a code 7, to keep a safe distance while waiting for the authorities. “Code 6” drivers should also be trained to casually mention the unit following them to vehicle occupants, or perhaps “wave” to the other unit, sounding conversational but with the preventive intention of notifying that a fellow unit is behind them. Depending on whether your radios allow the drivers to hear each other, and on your related procedures, drivers in the field that follow code 6 units should either report back to the dispatcher via radio or telephone. Thus, code 6 heavily relies on the fleet, it is preventive, it ensures another set of reporting eyes on the situation and it is effective.

Companies with GPS technology that reports the location of vehicles to the base station can of course handle code 6 reports in a greatly improved fashion. A GPS-equipped company may be able to trace the actual route, versus the likely route based on the initial report by the driver. If you do not have such technology, dispatchers should be trained to obtain additional information by waiting a few minutes after receiving a code 6, and then contacting the unit with a very typical and normal sounding yet entirely fake query. This query should be proceduralized and practiced. For example, the code 6 unit could be contacted regarding a “personal” trip reservation or a family member that is “on the phone” checking on his ride, and the dispatcher is needing an ETA on the current trip to advise the personal customer or family member. This will garner additional and potentially critical information from the code 6 driver, including the current location. Where possible this information is again broadcasted to the other vehicles in the fleet, who by this time should be listening for additional information.

If at any time a code 6 driver is unable to be contacted by the dispatcher the code 6 should be elevated to code 7, our next topic.

3. Code 7: Life Threatening Emergencies

If a driver reports a code 7, the present emergency is much more certain because of the availability of code 6 for suspicions. Code 7s should then be *reported to the police immediately*. This is true even if the driver “sounds” normal: the driver could be hostage and have been told to “make a normal report.” You may also want to report the situation to other companies, to expedite locating the code 7 unit, which is critical. Frequently fellow drivers will find the vehicle in transit more rapidly than the police will.

4. The Importance of Dispatcher Training and Drills

In order for all security procedures to be effective, it is very important that all drivers and dispatchers be trained. Practice drills for dispatchers will help them to respond correctly when the situation arises. Also, have all dispatchers attend driver-training classes. The importance of both training and practice cannot be overstated. The time to learn the procedure is well before any genuine event.

Note to all readers: If you have any procedures or additional codes or related information or materials or ideas that you would like to see incorporated into future editions of this article or into the TCS training program, please supply copies to TCS (e-mail preferred, admin@tcsconsultants.net). We again encourage all company owners and dispatchers to attend driver security training programs for their safety or proficient in their jobs.

5. Reporting Public Nuisances, Hazards and Emergencies

Another important communication procedure to have in place is a code for reporting public nuisances, hazards and emergencies, from fallen electrical wires to crimes in progress, that do not directly threaten the vehicle or drivers. Reporting such situations to the dispatcher enables them to be reported to the proper authorities. These reports are a public service, but they also serve to remind drivers to be observant and they get everyone communicating with safety in mind. One idea to encourage this reporting is to keep a log of reports by driver and award prizes. Decals and press releases can also decrease crime and gain recognition. For samples, see <http://transit-safety.volpe.dot.gov/security/TransitWatch/>.

Total Contract Solutions (“TCS”) provides a number of products and services for improving **ground transportation driver training** programs. Since 1995, TCS has consulted on, designed and/or delivered for-hire driver training programs and procedures in dozens of locations across the United States. We bring professional training experience in virtually every passenger ground transportation mode, including taxicab, limousine, paratransit, medical transportation, airport shuttle, on-airport bus service, campus transportation, motorcoach, tour and a variety of other specialty transportation modes. In addition to assisting both private and public clients with their internal training programs, TCS provides direct training to instructors, support staff and drivers. We have directly trained more than 1,000 drivers in the last three years alone.

TCS products and services provide several options for taking for-hire driver training to a higher level. These options allow each jurisdiction to tailor their approach to their current situation and needs. These options include direct training of drivers, custom development of or consulting on training programs, training program materials and templates for regulators or company provided training, and train-the-trainer instruction. For more information, please call TCS at (888) 827-8271, e-mail us at sales@tcsconsultants.net, or visit our website at www.totalcontractsolutions.com. We look forward to hearing from you.