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SCHOOL BUS SAFETY TASK FORCE
INITIAL REPORT
TO
GOVERNOR CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN

Peter Verniero, Attorney General
Department of Law & Public Safety

John Haley, Commissioner
Department of Transportation

Leo Klagholz, Commissioner
Department of Education

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INTRODUCTION

On September 23, 1997 you created the School Bus Safety Task Force in response to special State Police Inspection Squad activities during July, August and September, 1997 that revealed numerous safety violations on school buses in the State. The statistics on bus safety violations prompted a call to action -- of the 118 buses inspected by the State Police Squad, 85 were placed out-of-service for violations. Violations such as inoperative parking brakes, defective exhaust systems, and tire violations caused you to quickly mobilize the School Bus Safety Task Force to ensure the safety of New Jersey's most precious cargo -- our school children.

The first meeting of the Task Force was convened the day after you established the Task Force, September 24, 1997, and attended by Attorney General Peter Verniero, Commissioner of Education Leo Klagholz and Commissioner of Transportation John Haley. At that time, additional designees from the respective divisions were assigned as follows: Colonel Carl Williams, or his designee from the Division of State Police; Colonel Peter O'Hagan, or his designee from the Division of Highway Traffic Safety; Linda Wells from the Office of Pupil Transportation within the Department of Education; and Richard Kamin and Gary Mariano from the Division of Motor Vehicles within the Department of Transportation. In addition, Gabrielle Charette is representing your office.

A second meeting of the Task Force was held on October 15, 1997. As a result of these two meetings, the Task Force is now in a position to make specific short-term recommendations for immediate action as set forth in this preliminary report.

The School Bus Safety Task Force recommends for your consideration the following immediate steps be taken to enhance the existing school bus inspection system in the State of New Jersey:

1. Change the existing system of in-lane inspections for school buses to a system of in-terminal inspections.
2. Transfer, through executive reorganization, certain school bus safety and inspection functions from the Department of Education to the Department of Transportation.

Each of the recommendations is discussed more fully in the following sections of this report.

IN-TERMINAL INSPECTION PROGRAM

The Task Force recommends a change in the current in-lane inspection system to a system of in-terminal inspections. We believe an in-terminal inspection system will improve upon the current system by:

- Providing insight into the carrier's overall operation and commitment to maintenance.
- Allowing for interaction with the carrier's mechanics and operational personnel to facilitate immediate vehicle repairs.
- Allowing for an audit of the carrier's maintenance records, including daily defect slips, vehicle history records and driver history/credential records.
- Insuring the timely inspection of all buses.

I. Implementation Plan

The change from in-lane to in-terminal inspections will necessitate a retooling of the existing school bus inspection system. Specifically, it is contemplated that inspection teams dedicated to school bus issues be established. This would be accomplished by reassigning trained and experienced DMV Safety Specialists to a dedicated-team structure charged with the inspection of school buses at the bus operator's terminal.

A. Service Impact

The teams will inspect the buses at the operator's terminal at least twice per year. The operator will benefit by obviating the need for drivers to transport the vehicles to inspection stations, while the buses may be repaired and certified at

the time of the in-terminal inspection. The inspection teams will provide consistent, thorough inspections by utilizing a closely-monitored and trained staff. The removal of the buses from the inspection lanes will reduce sporadic, excessive waiting times for other vehicles being inspected.

B. Budget Impact

The personnel for the school bus inspection unit will be reassigned from the inspection lane staff. The lane staffing must be adjusted to maintain the ability to operate a sufficient number of lanes for other motorists. However, this should be kept to a minimum due to the fact that in-lane staff needs should be reduced proportionately with the redirection of buses away from the in-lane system. The Task Force is still evaluating the full fiscal impact of the change to an in-terminal system, both in the short-term and long-term. The Task Force will present additional information on this subject.

C. Comments

A recent survey of bus fleet operators was conducted to solicit opinions for ways to improve inspection service. Most respondents felt in-terminal inspections were beneficial to school bus operations. The in-terminal inspection will include audits of required maintenance records and driver checks, which cannot be performed during inspection station inspections.

II. Resources Required to Establish In-Terminal Teams

A. Technical Support

The scheduling and supervision of the bus inspections will be coordinated through a special unit within DMV Technical Support. This will require the establishment of a database for the entire school bus fleet.

B. Service Impact

The bus operators will be required to submit a list of all buses used for pupil transportation. The teams will be scheduled at each terminal twice per year. In addition, periodic, unannounced inspections will be conducted at a number of facilities. Bus operators having repeated, unsatisfactory inspections may be placed on a more frequent quarterly inspection cycle until the fleet and records show improvement.

C. Budget Impact

Personnel - The central scheduling and supervision unit requires one (1) Supervisor and three (3) Service Support Representatives.

The in-terminal inspections will require fifteen (15) teams comprised as follows: 9 supervisor III positions, 16 Safety Specialist I positions and 39 Safety Specialist II positions.

Equipment - 15 Vehicles and establishment of a database.

D. Comments

The scheduling of in-terminal inspections requires the development and compilation of a database comprised of information on every operator of school buses in the state. The inspection teams will be scheduled at each operator's terminal. Additionally, a number of unannounced inspections will be performed as a part of a quality assurance program. The New Jersey State Police will continue to participate with the Division of Motor Vehicles during the unannounced inspection process.

III. Additional Inspection Duties

In addition to the existing complement of inspection duties, other inspection and safety-related tasks are proposed for the new inspection teams. Those additional functions include, but are not limited to the following:

- Perform specification inspection on new or used buses which are newly purchased from out of state. This will assure each bus used in this state meets the specifications required by the Department of Education.
- Perform follow-up reinspections as required.
- May team up with primary team to assist in inspections for larger fleets.
- Perform surprise or unscheduled off-cycle inspections.
- Perform accident investigations on school bus related accidents.
- Observe evacuation drills to ensure compliance with existing rules.

IV. Additional Operational Issues

The following are additional functional changes that the Task Force believes will enhance the school bus inspection system to provide safer buses for the State's school children.

- Stagger existing fleets at terminals so inspection visits will be performed every six (6) months.
- Change existing school bus stickers to expire at the end of the month, not the 15th of the month.
- Change "limited movement" sticker to an "out of service" sticker.
- Develop a scheduling and tracking computer system.
- Revise and print new inspection forms.
- Revise and print new 12-year old vehicle warning form.
- Re-evaluate out of service and rejection criteria.
- Tracking of bus drivers to verify licensing requirements have been met.

**TRANSFER OF BUS SAFETY AND INSPECTION FUNCTIONS FROM
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION TO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION**

The Task Force recommends that certain bus safety and inspection functions currently being performed by the Department of Education's Office of Pupil Transportation be transferred to the Department of Transportation in order to improve coordination and efficiency in the area of school bus safety. The transfer can be affected by a plan of executive reorganization, which we are prepared to draft for your review, if you accept this recommendation. The specific functions that are proposed for transfer are:

- Develop and maintain safety education training courses and handbooks for students and drivers.
- Conduct school bus safety education workshops.
- Collect, analyze and prepare statistical information on school bus accidents.
- Codify school bus standards for vehicle bodies, chassis and equipment consistent with national standards.

It should be noted that the tasks proposed for transfer represent about 10% of the work function of the Office of Pupil Transportation. The remaining ninety percent of the office's work is related to the administration of the state aid program, facilitation of consolidated and more efficient transportation service, administration of pupil transportation contracts and other functions/tasks which are not directly related to school bus safety and inspection.

While we recommend the transfer of the enumerated functions, we note that continued coordination with the Department of Education's Office of Pupil

Transportation will be important in order to place school bus standards in the appropriate context as related to delivery of services to the student population and funding.

NEXT STEPS

Your direction to this Task Force was clear and compelling on the day that you announced its creation -- to ensure child safety first and foremost. Mindful of the absolute importance of our role, the Task Force quickly arrived at a consensus on the two interim recommendations in this initial report. It is our belief that these two changes represent an important first step in upgrading New Jersey's school bus inspection system, and we recommend your support.

The Task Force intends to continue its work. A critical part of this work will be to solicit input from affected citizen groups, school bus owners and operators and safety experts. Other longer range activities include:

1. Further review of public information efforts to determine if current activities are adequate or need enhancement.
2. Further discussion on a system of mandatory self-inspection by bus owners on a quarterly basis with mandatory reporting.
3. Further discussion of possible penalty and fine increased for school bus safety violations.

Thank you for this opportunity to advise you on these important issues.

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