

Violence aboard city bus Wednesday highlights need for better driver supports, union says

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A bus shield protected an operator from a dozen stabbing attempts made by a violent passenger brandishing scissors during the afternoon rush hour Wednesday.

The incident has led to calls for improved psychological supports for drivers.

Police say a 29-year-old man has been charged with assault with a weapon and possession of a weapon after he threatened passengers and the driver on a Route 11 bus near Portage Avenue and Arlington Street at about 5 p.m.

Winnipeg Police Service spokesman Const. Rob Carver said all passengers were able to evacuate before officers arrived but the driver was still on the bus. When the suspect refused to drop his weapon, police used a Taser on him, Carver said.

No injuries were reported but the man is in hospital, where he was taken for a medical assessment after the incident.

"The shield in the bus was absolutely critical in preventing the driver from getting injured," Carver told the *Free Press*.

While there were no physical altercations, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1505 — which represents about 1,500 employees, including both operators and mechanics — says its members need a better support program to address the psychological trauma that results from these increasingly common situations.

ATU Local 1505 president Aleem Chaudhary said the union spent years lobbying for improved safety measures; the city is in the process of installing shields on all buses. Now, it's pressing the city to update the existing peer-support program.

"Luckily, there was no physical injuries, but what about the psychological injuries?" Chaudhary said.

He said the city's current peer-support system isn't effective because it's handled by upper management — despite "peer" in the name — and the union doesn't have any input although its members came up with the idea for the program.

Chaudhary said drivers should have more input and be allowed to run the program themselves, rather than having it run by supervisors who don't drive buses.

"Who understands better than a co-worker that's been through it? Who can really relate to it?" he said.

A proactive support system for transit workers would save the city money, since employees would have an opportunity to address stress concerns with co-workers before things escalate and they require extended time off, he added.

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It is unclear what support the operator received after the incident. Chaudhary said he ended his shift early and was not working Thursday.

The city has not yet responded to a *Free Press* request for comment.

The collective agreement between the city and union expired in January. Winnipeg Transit has been in a legal strike position since May.

The union has repeatedly raised concerns about operator safety in negotiations.

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