

Bus Inspections on Location



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For a month I searched for a topic to discuss in this article. Luckily, a recent phone call from one of our friends at the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration provided one.

The call was an appeal for help in arranging bus inspections at popular destinations in the Mid-Atlantic states. Turns out, a group of commercial vehicle inspectors were told by a destination representative at a state-designated inspection site that their presence was not wanted. Apparently, the representative viewed the state police presence there as sending a negative message to bus operators and visitors. This couldn't be further from the truth.

The bottom line is, destinations that embrace and promote on-site motorcoach inspections give visible proof that they care about their visitors' well-being and want them to come back and tell their friends about their great experiences. The inspections also encourage visits by quality carriers, help get bad operators off the road and send a message to substandard providers that destinations care about safety. Bad operators—those who don't pay proper attention to safety—hurt the entire motorcoach travel industry, including destinations. Because it is possible that carriers will select a destination that does not require inspections over one that does, all destinations should work together to help protect their customers' well-being by embracing inspections.

For many years now, ABA has worked with Congress, the FMCSA and the enforcement community to keep our industry safe. While it is true that motorcoach travel is one of the safest forms of passenger transportation, not all motorcoach companies play by the rules. While statistics prove that the majority of motorcoach companies operate with safety as their No. 1 priority, there are substandard companies that carry passengers on a daily basis. Unfortunately, real-world experience has shown the consequences when safety becomes a secondary concern. Every day these operators continue to do business, they're rolling the dice with people's lives. We all know that when you gamble, you eventually lose. When that loss involves a motorcoach full of people, it's front-page news.

One of our most effective tools for getting bad operators off the road before tragedy strikes is inspecting buses and drivers while they're on the road. However, a provision in the highway reauthorization legislation that Congress passed last year was a ban

on roadside bus inspections. ABA encouraged the ban because the practice places inspectors and passengers at risk. With the ban in place, inspectors have to inspect motorcoaches either at an operator's facility or at the destination.

Past evidence has shown that marginal and unsafe operators usually don't have fixed facilities or move their base of operation frequently. We also know that both good and bad companies must go where their customers want to go. So, with Congress' roadside inspection ban in place, the only way safety inspectors can find and stop bad operators from doing business is to conduct inspections at passenger destinations.

There are many misconceptions among destination representatives about the inspection process. Some see it as having police in uniform with lights flashing in front of their property. Others worry about the reactions of passengers or visitors, especially if the passengers' bus or driver is placed out of service.

I understand these concerns, but they're not necessary. Here's why: First, the inspection team usually arrives in a van and a single car. Inspectors are dressed in coveralls because they must place the vehicles on ramps and get under them. If there is a concern about the use of a marked police vehicle, a destinations representative can ask that the lead car be unmarked. Second, officers direct a motorcoach to an unobtrusive, yet safe, location to conduct the inspection. Third, motorcoaches are only inspected after passengers have disembarked. The inspectors don't wish to inconvenience your customer any more than you do. Finally, in the event a motorcoach or driver is placed out of service for a serious safety violation, my experience has been that a reputable, local motorcoach operator will step in to assist in moving the passengers, particularly if they're contacted in advance of the inspection.

I have participated in very successful destination inspections in the past and can assure you that you have little to fear. If passengers ask about the inspection, explain that it is routine in most states and is a very effective means of protecting their safety. Don't be surprised when those passengers thank you for your care of their well-being. Still not convinced? Call me directly at the ABA, and I'll be glad to discuss this critical program in greater detail. And remember—safety sells. ■