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Police join forces for safety program

By HOWARD MOZEL
Special to The Independent/Free Press

Few traffic violations are as frowned upon as passing a stopped school bus with its lights flashing. Operation Bus Watch, a joint safety program between the Milton OPP and Halton Regional Police, hopes to make it a thing of the past.

After all, with children's lives at stake, such carelessness can exact a terrible toll. Despite the limits imposed by fiscal restraint and manpower shortages, says Halton Regional Police Sgt. Joe Martin, Operation Bus Watch is simply too important to pass over.

"We have zero tolerance when it comes to school bus infractions," said Sgt. Martin, who says it's physically impossible for officers to deal with every offence. "We will continue to protect our children any way we can."

The program, which was first implemented last year, works this way. When an infraction occurs, drivers — trained by police and armed with violation forms — jot down as much information as they can, such as licence number, driver description, circumstances etc. (Things happen so fast, one driver

with a chronic problem was finally charged after information was gathered from four incidents.)

The form is then submitted to the bus company's safety officer who passes it on to the program's liaison officer from the relevant police force. After obtaining the vehicle registration and completing an investigation, the officer has two options: send a letter of reprimand and an educational brochure to the registered owner of the offending vehicle or charge the driver.

According to Halton Regional Police Constable Carla Draper, the penalties are stiff: a \$265 fine, six demerit points and guaranteed increases in car insurance.

Last year 277 complaints were received.

"That's a tremendous amount of people who are not paying attention," Sgt. Martin continued. "That's ridiculous. There's no excuse. We have to use extra care around children."

According to Constable Draper, excuses do come easily. Drivers say they simply didn't see the large, yellow vehicle with all the flashing lights or make accusations of equipment misuse or mechanical failure.

Glen Attridge, owner of Attridge

Transport and an instrumental part of the program's creation, said provincial regulations dictate that equipment be checked every morning. Operation Bus Watch, he said, was born out of frustration by drivers who were filing 10 complaints a week.

"The biggest problem we had was the number of complaints and the almost helpless feeling when the Stop arm is engaged," said Attridge, explaining that there are over 300 school buses on the streets of Halton during peak traffic hours. "The main focus of this is public awareness."

Another key figure in the program, Constable Dave Thomas of the OPP's Milton detachment, said most complaints have been leveled against drivers under 25 years of age and over 50.

With stringent safety standards that apply to both the bus and its driver, statistics indicate passengers are 16 times safer traveling by that mode of transportation. The danger exists outside the bus: in the period between 1982 and 1992, 134 children were injured by buses in Ontario and 86 by other vehicles. There were 16 fatalities. Locally, there have been no fatalities.

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PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT

HALTON REGIONAL POLICE SERVICES BOARD
TAKE NOTICE:

Effective Friday, September 30, 1994 we will adjust the hours of public access to our No. 1 District Headquarters, 11 Division, 217 Guelph Street, Georgetown:

Sunday, Monday and Tuesday
8:00 a.m. to 12:00 midnight

Wednesday
8:00 a.m. to 1:00 a.m.

Thursday, Friday and Saturday
8:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m.

The new hours will not affect our police officers on patrol or our response to 9-1-1. Emergencies and other calls for service.