



Text a Tip:
Police Text Message Recommendation

February 2014 Report



Youth Advisory Council

Getting youth on board with SEPTA

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Text a Tip: Police Text Message Recommendation

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Purpose: This report investigates the text message programs that different public transit systems have implemented in the past few years and recommends a specific program for SEPTA.

About: Composed of young riders from Philadelphia, Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware, and Chester counties, the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) is SEPTA's official outreach group to riders ages 14 to 22. The Youth Advisory Council advocates student needs to SEPTA leadership, assists SEPTA in creating promotions, provides outreach to the region's youth, and educates peers about services and special events. For more information, visit us online at <http://septayac.com>.

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Introduction

Many public transportation systems are starting to implement text tips in order to ensure the safety of their passengers. Among them are Metro, NJ Transit, Amtrak, and PATCO. This report serves to analyze best practices and provide a recommendation as to how such a system should be implemented by the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority.

Comparable Systems

Metro's "MyMTPD Text Tips"

Metro's system, titled "MyMTPD Text Tips," is used for reporting suspicious activity, unattended bags, panhandling, and other non-emergencies. Riders can send a text message to MYMTPD from their smartphones or 696873 from their standard cell phones.

NJ Transit's "Text Against Terror"

NJ Transit's "Text Against Terror" program is a system that aims to report suspicious activity, packages, or vehicles around NJ Transit facilities or onboard the system. Riders can text to 65873. Those who text to the number above may receive a followup text message to gather additional information. The program was funded by a \$1.15 million grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Amtrak's "TXT-A-TIP"

Amtrak has also implemented a similar system. Its "TXT-A-TIP" program encourages riders to report crime and suspicious activity by texting APD11 from their smartphones or to 27311 from their standard cell phones. The sender will receive a text message acknowledging the report. He or she will then be connected to a live Amtrak Police Communications Officer, who will then correspond via texts to determine the appropriate action to take.

Philadelphia Regional Transit Partners' "Look Up; Speak Up"

A new addition to the region is the Philadelphia Regional Transit Partners' *Look Up; Speak Up* program. Funded through a department of homeland security grant, the system enables riders to report suspicious activity to the Delaware Valley Intelligence Center which 24-hour, all-crime information and intelligence collection facility that monitors and responds to threats throughout the region. Promotion advertises contacting the DVIC when observing loitering around mass transit facilities, unauthorized persons entering restricted areas, individuals asking questions related to transit security procedures, or individuals taking photographs or video of security systems, cameras, and patrols. DVIC members are directly connected to various area transportation agencies, including SEPTA. As of the writing of this report, riders can contact the center by dialing #1776 from their mobile phones or by calling 215-897-0979 from a landline; there is no current text message capability.

Report and Evaluation

In the year 2013, a total of 164 cell phones were stolen on SEPTA, according to *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. Unfortunately, only 32 led to arrests by the transit agency's police force. Numbers like these can be cut down if the riders act as the ears and eyes of the SEPTA police.

When interviewed about her thoughts on a potential texting program for SEPTA and whether it would affect the amount of times she uses SEPTA, Penn Nursing junior Bryn Czerniecki said that she'd feel safer reporting crimes through text messaging. "I'm not sure if I would frequent SEPTA more often only due to this new texting system, but I would definitely feel safer when I do go downtown using SEPTA. Just knowing that this is an option would be a relief. There are lots of Good Samaritans out there who would report crimes, so I think this would be a good system!"

The best method for implementing a text message system would be making the program accessible to people with smartphones, regular mobile phones, and landline phones. The necessity for such a program is due to the fact that some riders may want to report something that is alarming but not on the 911 level. They don't feel comfortable making a phone call for security reasons, so a text message would be much subtler and safer.

The hypothetical program would allow riders to report issues of non-emergency degrees, including noise complaints, suspicious activity, panhandling, and smoking.

Canada Transit Police Spokesperson Anne Drennan stated that "people have a right to ride transit harassment free," and she encourages riders to send text tips whenever they feel uncomfortable, whether that entails a passenger who's staring at them, making suggestive or profane comments, or standing too close - no concern is too small.

The ability to text about smokers is important. Oftentimes, people may be uncomfortable with confronting the smoker in person, so texting would be a safer alternative that riders would be more comfortable with. Seeing smokers on the platform is quite a frequent occurrence and can be a big deterrent when it comes to riders deciding whether or not to ride SEPTA.

Additionally, the panhandler epidemic is something that people would be more comfortable texting about. The ability to report such occurrences through text messaging would eliminate the potential for a dangerous confrontation.

NJ Transit Police Chief Christopher Trucillo said that "as the eyes and ears of the NJ Transit system, our customers and employees are the first line of defense in the war against terror, so it is critical that we all remain vigilant and aware of our surroundings." He went on to say that his team "looked at recent studies that say people prefer to communicate via text rather than talk on the phone. Some folks are intimidated by picking up a phone and dialing 911 or speaking to someone on the other end. They like, we've found, the anonymity of a text."

In summation, implementing a text report program to SEPTA would lead to decreased instances of “quality of life” issues aboard SEPTA, and would be an effective way to curb non-emergency crime on the transit system.

Final Recommendation

Based upon the success of similar systems throughout the industry and across the region, the SEPTA YAC herein recommends that the authority implement a text-message based system for riders to interact with SEPTA Transit Police. Be it through a joint-venture of both the SEPTA PD and Social Media departments or through a partnership with the newly created #1776 Delaware Valley Intelligence Center line, such action would be valuable for the authority by not only increasing security but also by making SEPTA more lucrative given the increased passenger access to emergency responders.

Additional Readings and Works Cited

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