

Too much of a hurry or inattentiveness?

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There's an alarming trend in Aitkin County - an increase in school bus stop arm violations.

"We believe the violations are due in large part to distracted driving and in some part due to a lack of under-

standing of the law," said Senior Assistant Aitkin County Attorney Lisa Roggenkamp Rakotz.

"In 2015, we prosecuted only three stop arm violations," she said. "As of Nov. 15, 2016, our office has prosecuted 12 stop arm violations with seven of those occurring during September and Octo-

ber since the start of the new school year."

Police Officer Dustin Byrnes said there has been an increase in calls to law enforcement for this violation.

"I mostly attribute the increase to distracted driving and drivers being in a hurry,"

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School bus transportation is safe. In fact, buses are safer than cars! Even so, last year, approximately 26 students were killed and another 9,000 were injured in incidents involving school buses. More often than not, these deaths and injuries didn't occur in a crash, but as the pupils were entering and exiting the bus.



SCHOOL BUS SAFETY TIPS

Stay away from the bus until it comes to a **complete stop** and the driver signals you to enter.

Stay away from the bus until the driver gives his/her signal that it's ok to approach.

Keep a safe distance between you and the bus. Also, remember that the bus driver can see you best when you are back away from the bus.

Have a safe place to wait for your bus, **away from traffic and the street.**

Be aware of the street traffic around you. Drivers are required to follow certain rules of the road concerning school buses, however, not all do.

When being dropped off, exit the bus and **walk ten giant steps away** from the bus.

Use the handrail to enter and exit the bus.

Protect yourself and watch out!

Violations/ 'People need to realize we're not in a hurry.'

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Byrnes said.

The penalties for a stop arm violation depend on whether there are children outside the bus when the violation occurs. If the children are still on the bus, then the violation is a misdemeanor which carries a maximum sentence of 90 days jail and/or a \$1,000 fine with a minimum fine of \$300. If the children are outside the bus or the person passes the bus on the righthand side, then the violation is a gross misdemeanor, which carries a maximum sentence of 365 days and/or a \$3,000 fine with a minimum fine of \$900.

SCHOOL BUS LAWS

Flashing red lights warn motorists that a school bus is loading or unloading students. When a school bus is stopped with its red lights flashing and its stop arm extended, you must stop your vehicle at least 20 feet from the bus. Oncoming traffic and motorists approaching the bus from behind may not move until the stop arm is re-

tracted and the red lights are no longer flashing. You are not required to stop for a school bus with its red lights flashing if it is on the opposite side of a separated roadway.

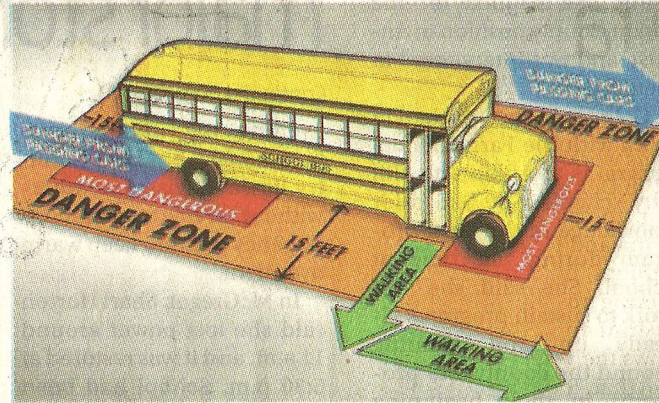
In 2015, a bill, HF 1948, was proposed in the Minnesota legislature that stated a motorist who failed to stop for a school bus on the right side of the bus on the roadway or adjacent sidewalk used by the bus is guilty of a misdemeanor. The violator could receive a fine of at least \$500 and be required to complete a driver improvement clinic.

Rep. Dale Lueck (R), Minnesota District 10B, said the bill had passed through two committees in the House but stalled in a Senate committee.

"If data is showing us people are ignoring basic safety, maybe it's appropriate to increase that penalty," said Lueck.

BUSES ON THE ROAD

In Minnesota, school buses make at least 10,000 school bus trips daily. According to the National Highway Traffic



Safety Administration, school buses are the safest mode of transportation for children - children are eight times safer riding in a bus to school than in any other vehicle.

From 2011-2015, there were 3,396 school bus crashes in Minnesota, resulting in 13 deaths.

DANGER ZONE

More children are killed outside of a school bus than they are as bus occupants. Motorists must anticipate children in a school bus "danger zone" - the area around a bus where most injuries and deaths occur.

SAFETY TIPS FOR CHILDREN

- When waiting for the bus: Be patient, stand back from the road and no running or rowdy behavior.
- When on the bus: stay seated, listen to the driver and use quiet voices.
- It's important for parents to discuss and demonstrate pedestrian safety with their children and reinforce safe crossing after exiting a bus:
- When getting off a bus, look to be sure no cars are passing on the shoulder (side of the road).
- Before crossing the street, take five "giant steps" out from the front of the bus, or

until the driver's face can be seen.

- Wait for the driver to signal that it's safe to cross.
- Look left-right-left when coming to the edge of the bus to make sure traffic is stopped. Keep watching traffic when crossing.

SAFETY TIPS FOR MOTORISTS

- Motorists must stop at least 20 feet from a school bus that is displaying red flashing lights and/or its stop arm is extended when approaching from the rear and from the opposite direction on undivided roads.
- Red flashing lights on buses indicates students are either entering or exiting the bus.
- Motorists are not required to stop for a bus if the bus is on the opposite side of a separated roadway (median, etc.) - but they should remain alert for children.
- Altering a route or schedule to avoid a bus is one way motorists can help improve safety. In doing so, motorists won't find themselves behind a bus and as a result, poten-

tially putting children at risk.

- Watch for school crossing patrols and pedestrians. Reduce speeds in and around school zones.
- Watch and stop for pedestrians - the law applies to all street corners, for both marked and unmarked crosswalks (all street corners) - every corner is a crosswalk.

A CONCERN

"This violation is of great concern," noted Byrnes. "It is not only exceedingly hazardous to our kids, but it also shows just how distracted drivers are in general. I would like to ask drivers to put down their phones and other distractions as they drive. Please watch out for school buses specifically when you see the yellow flashing lights - prepare to stop and remain stopped until the red flashing lights are turned off."

"I think people need to realize we're not in a hurry," said Tom Bruss, transportation supervisor for Aitkin Public Schools. "We're in the business of getting kids home safely. Stop arm violators are putting our kids in danger."