

Los Angeles

Some Bus Drivers Ban Breastfeeding, Protesters Allege

MTA officials apologize for the actions of a few but say there is no policy against nursing.

By JIA-RUI CHONG
Times Staff Writer

A group of protesters accused Metropolitan Transportation Authority drivers of breaking a state law that allows women to breastfeed in public and picketed Tuesday outside its downtown Los Angeles headquarters.

MTA officials apologized for drivers who have asked women to stop breastfeeding, but said they have no policy that bans breastfeeding on buses or trains.

About 50 women nursed infants and wore shirts saying "Got breast milk?" to call attention to the issue. Among them was Claudia Flores, who said she was asked twice by different drivers on Route 55 to stop nursing her daughter.

Luz Chacon, a health education coordinator for Maternal and Child Health Access, which organized the protest, said 15 other women have complained to her in the last couple of years that bus or rail passengers have asked them to stop breastfeeding.

"We think there are more instances of drivers doing this, but women aren't necessarily coming forward," she said.

Flores, who spoke through a Spanish translator, said she was first asked to stop in December, when she was on Route 55 from downtown Los Angeles. The driver saw Flores, 32, in her

in the rearview mirror and asked her to stop breastfeeding.

Flores said she showed the driver a card citing a 1997 state law that allows women to breastfeed in public. She said the bus driver laughed and tossed the card on the dashboard.

"I felt bad," she said. "I felt hurt, embarrassed and humiliated. But I knew I had the right. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to report this.'"

Flores brought her concerns to Maternal and Child Health Access, a nonprofit that helps low-income women and their families get health and social services. The organization contacted the MTA, and the MTA told the organization it would notify all bus drivers of the law.

But two weeks ago, another bus driver on the same route asked Flores to stop breastfeeding and accused her of public indecency, she said.

"I covered myself. You couldn't see flesh," Flores said.

Flores, who relies on buses for transportation, said she can't help nursing her 19-month-old daughter, Betsy, while she's on the bus. "If she's hungry, I am going to feed her."

Chacon, Flores and the other protesters called on the MTA to better educate drivers and put placards about the state law on buses and trains so other passengers do not create a hostile environment.



RICARDO DEARATANHA Los Angeles Times

NURSING: Claudia Flores said she has been told by two bus drivers to stop breastfeeding her 19-month-old daughter, Betsy.

"It's unfortunate the public thinks it's indecency," Chacon said. "They relate the breast to sexuality, but in reality we're mammals and this is what we do."

MTA officials said they have received only two complaints about drivers banning breastfeeding, both from Flores.

"We're admitting we were wrong," said MTA spokesman Marc Littman. "But you've got to keep this in perspective: We've got 360 million boarding

passengers on the bus and we have rail on top of it."

The agency is sending out a bulletin to 500 bus and train drivers with their Friday paychecks and plans to beef up training.

Carolyn Flowers, executive officer for operations, said many drivers already know the law, including one who she said told a complaining customer last week that women were allowed to breastfeed on buses.

MCHA Organizes Nurse-in/Protest at MTA headquarters

Despite a 1997 law giving women the right to breastfeed in public (Section 43.3 of the California Civil Code), MCHA has found that many of our clients are harassed on MTA buses when breastfeeding and one of our clients was actually told by 2 different bus drivers to stop breastfeeding. After the first incident MCHA corresponded with the MTA, asking them to correct this violation. We were told that all drivers were informed through a bulletin that breastfeeding is permissible on all MTA buses and rails, but then the second incident occurred. After writing to the MTA again, letting them know that the action they took was insufficient, and not hearing back from them, MCHA organized the 8/31/04 nurse-in/protest along with the Breastfeeding Task Force of Greater Los Angeles and the Bus Riders Union. Please see 9/1/04 L.A. Times article, which provided great coverage, but underestimated the attendance. There were at least 75-100 adults and numerous babies and children marching, chanting and carrying signs. The story was also covered by all the major English and Spanish-language television networks and several radio stations.

While we succeeded in getting extensive media coverage, the MTA has still not agreed to meet our requests. To date, they have distributed a memo and developed an internal policy, both stating that California law and the MTA allows women to breastfeed while riding the bus or rail systems. However, since many may not take the time to read the memo and passengers are also harassed by other passengers, we are asking the MTA to go beyond this and do the following:

- Train all bus drivers about the importance of breastfeeding and the California law that protects breastfeeding in public.
- Post the National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign* materials, with the slogan, "Babies Were Born to be Breastfed" in all buses.

ACTION ALERT - We urge you to join our efforts by doing the following:

- Report any violations of this law to the MTA by either calling their customer comment line – 213.922.6235 or completing an on-line comment form at www.mta.net by following these links: "riding metro", "contact information", "Metro customer comment form" or go directly to: <http://mtaweb6.mta.net/cc/cc.asp> It's best if passengers have the bus# and operator's badge #.
- Let MCHA know of any further violations of this law so we can compile incidents.
- Send an email to customerrelations@metro.net urging them to take the necessary action to remedy this problem by meeting the requests above. If you send an email, please also cc or forward it to luzc@mchaccess.org so we can compile these messages.

Please contact Luz Chacón at MCHA 213.749.4261 for more information about this issue.

*The recently launched National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health and was developed by the Ad Council. It is sponsored locally by the Breastfeeding Task Force of Greater Los Angeles and in addition to the print ads that we are asking the MTA to put inside buses, the campaign also features radio and TV PSAs, as well as bus shelter materials. For more information on the campaign, visit the Breastfeeding Task Force of Greater Los Angeles website at www.breastfeedla.org