

Life of a school crossing guard is more perilous than you think

By Cathy Woodruff
SENIOR WRITER

You probably won't see one leaping across the rooftops with Matt Damon in his next spy thriller, but a school crossing guard is likely to face more-than-enough potential danger in a day's work.

"I've seen it all," said Kathy Jourdain, a 40-year veteran of the crossing guard crew in the Schenectady County village of Scotia. "The drivers slam on their brakes. You've got to worry about ice. I had a close call once – a car smashed into another one and ended up right where I'd been standing."

Despite their brightly colored safety vests and reflective, hand-held stop signs, crossing guards say they sometimes feel virtually invisible to drivers.

"I've had people drive right around me while I'm trying to cross kids," said Jacqueline Groves-Spencer, a crossing guard in Menands, a suburb just north of Albany.

Among those concerned about these close calls: insurers and risk managers. *On Board* recently sat in on a new statewide training program created by PERMA (the Public Employer Risk Management Association).

PERMA, a NYSSBA school services partner, is a non-profit workers compensation insurance pool for public employers in New York State.

Although they can – and even should – work closely with school officials, crossing guards typically are employed by municipalities under the supervision of police departments. In a recent review of workers' compensation claims for police, PERMA professionals found that while crossing guard claims account for only 2 percent of all police claims handled by the insurance cooperative, they cost an average of \$91,000 – about twice the average cost of a police claim for lost time.

"We found there were not a lot of claims, but when they happened, they were expensive," said Lewis Moskowitz, public safety risk management specialist for PERMA and a retired Niskayuna police chief.

The goal of the PERMA training was to teach crossing guards how to reduce



Above, trainees took turns crossing each other. At left, instructor Rocco Fragomeni admires Jacqueline Groves-Spencer's vest, and below, Al Ventrice admires his training certificate. Photos by Barbara Bennett



their risk of injury while protecting students.

The most common cause of injury for New York crossing guards, according to PERMA, is side-swiping by drivers who whiz by too close and strike them with a side mirror. Most of those claims involve multiple injuries, PERMA analysts say.

Ergonomic issues related to holding signs or carrying out awkward or repetitive movements, such as waving and motioning, also account for some injuries. Trips and stumbles while stepping off a curb or stepping into a pothole can sideline crossing guards, too.

After reviewing the data, Moskowitz said, PERMA officials investigated options for upgrading prevention. Aside from some locally-developed programs in larger cities, he said, they found little formal training in place for school crossing guards around New York.

"A lot of times," he said, "it's 'Here's your (stop sign) paddle. Here's your vest. Here's your whistle. Be careful.'"

So, in collaboration with the Zone 5 Regional Law Enforcement Academy in Schenectady, PERMA is rolling out a new crossing guard training program and taking it on the road.

Jourdain and Groves-Spencer were among nine students attending the inaugural class in Schenectady. The training was based on a curriculum developed by Zone 5 Academy Director Rocco Fragomeni, who taught that class and was scheduled to lead several more in the following weeks in Canastota, Pittsford, Mamaroneck and Port Washington. More than 160 students had signed up by mid-August.

The class featured briefings on parti-

cular state laws, optimum equipment, and proper techniques and procedures. The crossing guards piped up often to drive classroom discussions about the challenges they face, such as: "What about the kids on skateboards?" The session concluded with practice exercises in the training academy gym.

"We took a national curriculum and tailored it to our audience here," said Fragomeni, a retired suburban police chief from North Greenbush in Rensselaer County.

Moskowitz and Fragomeni said the design and content of the program likely will evolve as they continue to road-test it. "It's really important to give them the information in the classroom presentation and also to give them a chance to practice in the field," Fragomeni said.

The Schenectady exercises, which had been slated to take place in a Scotia school parking lot, were abbreviated and moved inside because of a rainstorm.

It is not entirely clear why the individual workers' compensation indemnity claim costs and lost work time tend to be so much greater for crossing guards than for other police employees. Moskowitz said one likely contributor is the age of most crossing guards.

The average age for a crossing guard with injuries prompting a PERMA indemnity claim is 63, according to the association's analysts.

Often, the candidates most willing and available to work the scant hours and split shifts of a crossing guard are retirees in their 50s, 60s or 70s, Moskowitz noted. As a result, they often do not recover as quickly as younger employees, and they miss more work time, he said.

Meanwhile, driver distractions abound. Motorists fiddle with electronic devices, chew on breakfast sandwiches or struggle to navigate unfamiliar traffic patterns at busy intersections. They also may not appreciate the crossing guard who is delaying their journey, and they can get impatient.

"One thing I can't do is make the drivers around you courteous," Fragomeni said after listening to yet another crossing guard's story of bad motorist behavior. "You're preaching to the choir."

Tips for crossing guard safety

Here are a few tips for crossing guards delivered at a training session by Rocco Fragomeni, director of the Zone 5 Regional Law Enforcement Academy and retired North Greenbush police chief:

- When using a whistle, strive for short bursts of sound – just enough to draw attention. Use it judiciously. Excessive or improper use will reduce its effectiveness.
- Select safety vests with top prod-

uct ratings and plentiful reflective material.

- Keep extraneous movements to a minimum. Waves intended for children can be misinterpreted by motorists as a signal to proceed. While in the intersection, do not make hand or head movements that might be misconstrued by a driver.
- Raise the STOP paddle with the arm that will be closest to the opposite side of the street when you take your

position for crossing children. Hold the paddle shoulder-high and be sure your body is not blocking the view for traffic in either direction. Traffic in both directions should have a clear, direct view of the STOP message during the entire crossing movement.

- Turn your head, as necessary, to look directly at motorists.
- Signal students to cross with clear verbal instructions. Minimize hand

gestures, so drivers do not become confused.

- Place a traffic cone on the side of the road, perhaps 60-to-100 yards from the crosswalk, for your own reference. The best placement will depend on the usual vehicle speed on the road. The cone helps a crossing guard gauge whether a vehicle is far enough away to have sufficient time to stop if the guard enters the crosswalk with STOP sign raised.

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