



## **Winging it Behind the Wheel and ‘Muddling Through’: Many Migrant Drivers Presenting Transportation-related Problems for Police**

By Joy Brown

A message on the back of many semi-trucks asks, “How’s my driving?” When local law enforcement personnel are posed a similar question regarding migrants behind the wheel, their answer is simple: to put it kindly, there’s plenty of room for improvement.

“I would say that driving is one of the biggest problems we’re running into” with international newcomers, said Findlay Police Department Officer Brian White.

“The regulations for driving are different here than elsewhere,” said White. “Communication is difficult, with English as a second, third, or fourth language for them. And trying to understand what it takes to get the correct licensing and documentation is hard. You don’t know what you don’t know. You need documentation to drive; sometimes they don’t even have a social security number. Some think you just need an international driving permit, but you have to have an actual driver’s license from the state,” he explained.

To receive an Ohio driver’s license, migrants must pass a driving test like the general population. But even some international newcomers who do so tend to default to the more precarious driving practices typical in their home countries, officials contend.

Haiti’s cities are right up there in terms of some of the worst urban driving conditions in the world, say those who have visited and lived there. Compared to America’s driving standards, Haiti’s traffic is notoriously congested, chaotic, and disorganized. Signage is nearly nonexistent, streets are typically unpaved, and many vehicles aren’t equipped with brakes or headlights. This means that newcomers from that country meet with a far different, more restrictive, vehicular environment in the U.S. All regional law enforcement offers say they are contending with this dichotomy.

“For instance, driving under the influence, that’s not really a thing in Haiti. If you drive and dump a container, it’s not a big deal. Here, of course, it’s a really big deal,” White said.

White, with a translator on hand, has provided vehicle operation training sessions for immigrants who live at the hotels near Trenton Avenue. It's a proactive effort meant to curb safety issues and better educate this driving contingent.

"A lot of them (migrants) work at the cookie factory," said McComb Police Chief Tammy Blunk, referring to Hearthside Food Solutions located near the village. The increased presence of international workers at the manufacturing facility has caused traffic issues, she said. Because many of those workers don't have cars or driver's licenses, carpooling is common, with some drivers either not knowing vehicular laws or choosing not to obey them.

"We've had a lot of complaints from residents who are trying to go to work (at Hearthside), and they can't get through because they're (carpool drivers) blocking the road," said Blunk. "The drivers drop people off and then sit there in the road and wait for others to come off their shift and pick them up. They've parked three across the road going in the same direction, with cars lining up behind them."

At times, Blunk said she's had difficulties getting drivers to move off the road and understand that they should instead pick up and drop off in the business's parking lot. Threatening to tow vehicles and make arrests usually does the trick.

Hancock Area Transportation Services (HATS), which provides public transportation throughout Hancock County, has been serving international newcomers for years. HATS, offered by the non-profit HHWP Community Action Commission, is a safe alternative and one of the more affordable options.

"Our job is to alleviate poverty in the community. That's our mission," said Jamie Baker, HATS' director of transportation services. With many migrants arriving with no money and few possessions, some turn to HATS for help with physically navigating the region.

"I'm all for helping people assimilate. These folks are just like us," said Baker. "They speak a different language, they may be a different color than we are, but our ancestors came here for a better life, too, at some point, and these people are the same."

HATS transports international newcomers who, for instance, need to buy food, have important appointments, need a ride to and from work, and require medical care.

Baker recalled one ride where he started singing, "The Wheels on the Bus Go 'Round and 'Round," and a young boy chimed in, singing the song in Haitian Creole. "Even though there's a language barrier, things can transcend that," he said.

But HATS has faced newcomer-related challenges. For instance, some newcomers erroneously think the transportation is free or try to barter for a lower ride price, he said.

He noted that HATS now transports fewer people to job sites but picks up and drops off migrants who are now scattered throughout the city instead of primarily living at the hotels. The numbers served “are hit or miss” rather than steady, he said.

“We’ve kind of muddled through it,” Baker continued. “We’re a small nonprofit with a limited budget. We can’t afford translation services.”

Baker said HATS has been in talks with governmental officials about the possibility of creating a fixed-route system to serve the general public’s needs, not only those of migrants, which would offer a solid, predictable schedule. The organization, however, would have to have a dedicated government funding source from the City of Findlay and/or Hancock County, he noted. Meetings have been held to gather public input.

Meanwhile, HATS will continue to serve migrants as best as it can.

“We should be a welcoming community,” said Baker.