

LOCAL NEWS

More stop arm cameras coming to Minnesota school buses

The grant project aims to help keep kids safe while also holding drivers accountable who fail to stop for school buses with flashing lights and stop arms extended.



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MONTICELLO, Minnesota — School districts and bus companies across the state are in the process of installing stop arm cameras to their school buses as part of a four-phase project.

The Minnesota Department of Public Safety Office of Traffic Safety (DPS-OTS) has already awarded more than \$7.2 million to schools and transportation companies for stop arm camera systems since the beginning of 2021 through Phase 1 and Phase 2. They are currently in the midst of Phase 3 of the project. DPS-OTS is partnering with the Minnesota State Patrol, along with local police and sheriff departments across the state.

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The Stop Arm Camera Grant Project aims to help keep kids safe while also holding drivers accountable who fail to stop for school buses with flashing lights and stop arms extended.

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Minnesota state legislators have approved \$14.7 million in total funding for the project for 2022 and 2023.

"The whole idea of this is no student and no parent should ever have to worry about that trip to or from the school bus. What we've seen in Minnesota, and this is also across the country, is a growing and significant increase in the disregard on the part of drivers for school bus stop arms when they're extended," said Mike Hanson, DPS-OTS's director.

In the past five years, law enforcement has cited more than 4,600 drivers for stop arm violations. According to a survey by the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services, 4,359 school bus drivers in Minnesota observed 1,003 stop arm violations in one day in 2022.

Adam Kounkel, a manager at Hoglund Transportation in Monticello, witnesses violations every day.

"Without fail, minimum 3 or 4 a day, probably," Kounkel said.

Hoglund Transportation is currently installing stop arm cameras for their school buses. Kounkel expects all the equipment will be installed by MEA break. The company is a grant recipient from Phase 1, receiving \$20,384 for 23 camera systems for its buses.

"I do think it's going to help a ton in a lot of different ways," Kounkel said, who once witnessed an impatient driver cut across a person's yard and past the kids getting off the bus to access a side road.

"This is a proactive, education outreach program that's also backed up by enforcement," Hanson explained.

While the goal is not to write a bunch of citations, Hanson expects to see those numbers increase now that they will have the evidence to back it up.

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"In the cases where these drivers are flagrantly going through these stop arms and putting our kids in danger, the information will be turned over to law enforcement," Hanson said.

State law requires drivers to 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.

Drivers who do not stop for school buses face a \$500 fine.

Phase 4 is expected to wrap up by the end of the year. By the time the project is complete, Hanson estimates there will be more than 6,000 buses across the state with the stop arm camera system.

Hanson said they are waiting a couple months to gather information but expect a preliminary report on how things are going with the cameras by around Thanksgiving.

He added, "We need to have drivers held accountable. No parent and no student should fear that trip to or from school and that's what this is all about."

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