

## NYC CRIME

# NYPD traffic enforcement agents say their safety is at risk as they handle more duties usually done by cops

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They're not just meter maids anymore.

NYPD traffic enforcement agents, once relegated to just writing parking tickets and directing traffic, have been given new duties over the last few years from recovering stolen automobiles to handling fender benders to responding to 311 complaints about blocked driveways — all jobs traditionally handled by actual police officers.

Union heads are trying to quash the new responsibilities, which are couched as part of city pilot programs, until the agents get extra compensation or protection.

"It's a risk and a safety issue," said Syed Rahim, the president of the Communications Workers of America Local 1182, which represents traffic enforcement agents. "If the police do this job, then the motorist knows that the officer has a gun. With traffic enforcement agents they do not care."

According to Rahim, an average of three agents were spit at or verbally or physically assaulted on the job every week before the pilot programs began. More are expected as agents do work usually performed by police officers, he said.

Before 1996, agents wore brown uniforms and were known as "brownies." They started wearing blue after becoming part of the police department but don't carry a gun.

The new duties are designed to alleviate the burden on the NYPD so officers can focus on crime fighting, officials said.

"(Agents) are being used as force multipliers because they have the blue uniform — and that can put them at risk," said former City Council member and mayoral candidate Sal Albanese, who has advocated for traffic enforcement agents for the last two decades. "These new jobs are also saving the city a lot of money by not tying up police officers in squad cars when agents are being paid half as much."

As part of their new responsibilities, agents help recover stolen vehicles found on city streets.

"The people who steal these cars could be dangerous," Rahim said. "When we see a stolen car, we don't know if they are still in the car or if they are coming back."

NYPD officials said traffic agents haven't officially taken over these duties but are assisting police with them.

When it comes to the stolen car recovery program, for example, agents who spot a stolen vehicle must alert the NYPD so an officer can be dispatched.

Sending traffic agents to respond to minor car crashes frees up cops from having to create reports, which can take two to three hours to fill out. It also cuts down on response time. Agents can arrive within a hour while a squad car may take two, Rahim said.

Rahim has filed repeated grievances with City Hall in the hopes of blocking the expansion of these programs until his members get compensated for the extra work. He's also pushing for them to be rebranded as traffic enforcement officers, a title that could bring expanded salaries and benefits.

"They have to upgrade and expand our title," he said. "My members have no problem doing the work."

Agents are now responsible for issuing tickets to motorists caught "blocking the box" at major intersections.

"When we do the block the box enforcement, (the drivers) know that we are not police officers and that we don't carry guns so when we are forced to pull them over, they say, 'Who the hell are you?' Rahim said. "It can lead to a confrontation."

Some of these new duties began in 2016, after the union's contract with the city was ratified to include a 10% pay boost over the next seven years. The new jobs were not part of the contract agreement, Rahim said.

Starting salaries for agents giving out parking tickets currently begin at \$31,000 while agents assigned to direct traffic make about \$38,000. The starting salary for NYPD officers is \$42,500.

The pay amounts to about \$15 an hour, said Rahim, who has spent the last year negotiating for a new contract. Some of his agents are working 70 hours a week just to keep food on the table, he said.

"Workers at Dunkin' Donuts and McDonald's get \$15 an hour," he said. "We are generating billions of dollars for the city but they are not treating us fairly. They are treating us poorly. All we want is a fair share and a livable wage."

Rahim hopes the new contract will elevate starting salaries to the lower and mid-\$40,000s range.

"Traffic enforcement agents and these expanded programs help keep streets safe for all New Yorkers, and we commend their work, mayoral spokesman Raul Contreras told the Daily News in a statement. "We look forward to working with enforcement agents to reach a contract that is fair to workers and New York City tax payers, as we've done with the majority of city workers."