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## Access Denied

### Transit experts and advocates for disabled New Yorkers, seniors, parents, and veterans to MTA: “Let us ride”

Disability rights groups, parent advocates, aging groups, and transit advocates launched a campaign today calling on Governor Cuomo and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to adopt clear, ambitious plans to make the NYC subway system fully accessible and to address long-term dysfunction in MTA elevator maintenance operations. The groups marked the release of a TransitCenter report entitled “Access Denied: Making the MTA Subway System Accessible to All New Yorkers.” The report chronicles the short and long term policy failures that have rendered the MTA the least accessible subway system in the country, and presents actionable recommendations to remedy the problem. “Access Denied” is available online at <http://transitcenter.org/publications/access-denied/>

The report notes that while the MTA will achieve accessibility at “100 key stations” identified in a 1994 legal settlement in its current cycle of capital investments, the agency has no clear plans for expanding the number of accessible stations going forward. “Having no strategy, plan, goal or set of benchmarks to significantly expand accessibility — let alone make every station in the system accessible — is unconscionable nearly 30 years after passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act,” said Chris Pangilinan, a transit expert, subway rider, and wheelchair user who works at TransitCenter.

“With subway service in free-fall, people may ask ‘is this an issue to focus on now?’” said Mel Plaut, principal author of “Access Denied” and TransitCenter staff member. “In fact, being able to access the full subway system is fundamental to a full and successful life in New York City. We’re releasing our report now to put these issues squarely on Governor Cuomo’s and Chairman Lhota’s agendas as they develop plans to improve MTA performance. It’s critical that a strategy for full system accessibility be included in the next capital program and that the MTA finally address decades of failure in keeping elevators running.”

The report documents how limited subway trip-making is for people who can access only 110 of 472 subway stations, and that this limitation is compounded by the daily roll of the dice that

subway elevator users face in terms of elevator breakdowns and inaccurate alerts regarding outages.

NYC subways are the least accessible major subway system in the country for people who require stair-free access. Only 23% of the city's subway stations have elevators. The elevators break down often, rendering even fewer stations accessible to those with mobility impairments. In contrast, Boston's "T" and Chicago CTA urban rail networks have more than twice the station accessibility, and thus vastly greater trip-making opportunities for people requiring accessible stations despite being 100-plus year-old systems like the NYC subway. After city and transit leaders empowered agency staff to tackle the issue, 71% of Boston's subway stations and 69% of Chicago's rail stations have been made accessible. Both cities have concrete plans to reach 100% accessibility.

In 1994, the MTA agreed to make 100 "key stations" accessible by 2020. This was part of a settlement that exempted the agency from full compliance with the ADA and the state's Public Buildings and Transportation Laws. The MTA is currently working to complete the final 11 of these 100 stations. But beyond fulfilling this 25-year-old agreement, neither the Cuomo Administration nor the MTA has an articulated plan or policy for making the system more accessible in the future.

"New York City's subway was the first older rail system in the U.S. to agree to make some subway stations wheelchair accessible which was groundbreaking," said James Weisman, president and CEO of United Spinal Association. "We now find ourselves, however, living in a city with the least accessible rail system in the country. New York City Transit hasn't made the necessary commitment to enhancing accessibility to the subway. Provide access and reduce dependency on perpetually expensive Access a Ride services."

"Boston and Chicago made real progress on accessible subway stations because they embraced the spirit rather than the letter of the law on accessibility," said Plaut. "We need Governor Cuomo and Chairman Lhota to make the same commitment."

"We cannot and will not wait another century for full subway accessibility," said Pangilinan.

"New Yorkers deserve a transit system that is not only affordable and reliable, but one that is accessible, particularly for the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who depend on elevators to access the subway system," said Jaqi Cohen, Campaign Coordinator for the Straphangers Campaign. "It's time for the MTA and Governor Cuomo to make good on their promise to improve the City's transportation network, which includes creating greater access to its woefully inaccessible subway system."

"Transportation access is the second biggest barrier to employment for people with disabilities. We need reliable transportation like everybody else," said Monica Bartley of the Center for Independence of the Disabled, NY.

“Accessibility to public transportation is essential to making New York City age-friendly. That’s especially true with the city’s 65+ population projected to skyrocket by 40 percent between 2010 and 2040,” said Chris Widelo, Associate State Director of the AARP New York. “Better accessibility to the subway system would help more older New Yorkers remain independent and self-sufficient, access services, and avoid isolation. Being the least accessible of any large system in the nation isn’t close to good enough. AARP fully supports TransitCenter’s campaign.”

“As parents, we need more working elevators. It is incredibly difficult to navigate entering and exiting the subway system here without them, and our constituency is severely limited as a result. This situation makes New York a hostile place to have a family and ultimately forces people out. Our 1,000 members have joined the campaign to improve accessibility and give families a safe, fair opportunity to physically reach and fully participate in our city,” said Christine Serdjenian of the parent group, UP-STAND.

Governor Cuomo and the MTA leadership have the power to remedy today’s unreliability and vastly accelerate progress on system-wide accessibility for the NYC subway. “Access Denied” calls on the Governor and transit leaders to incorporate detailed ADA accessibility improvements into the MTA’s Twenty-Year Capital Needs Assessment and the 2020-2024 Capital Program, with a strategic goal of 100% accessibility and clear targets and benchmarks on the way to full accessibility. The investment strategy and focused policy attention should allow a faster pace of new elevator construction, such as 15 newly accessible stations a year. This would result in 100% accessibility in 25 years. As an example, Chicago has set a deadline of 20 years to achieve 100% accessibility in its system.

In the short run, the MTA needs to completely overhaul subway elevator maintenance and management practices, with a focus on employee retention, better training, tracking, reporting and accountability for performance. If the agency cannot accomplish better elevator reliability in-house, the MTA should contract out for elevator maintenance operations to a private company that specializes in the field, like tens of thousands of elevator buildings in the city do already.

“We cannot continue to tell those unable to get up and down steps on their own that the subway system is not for them,” said City Council Transportation Chair Ydanis Rodriguez. “There needs to be a real plan to tackle the lack of accessibility in the city subway system. This not only means more elevators must be built, but those that are already in place must be maintained. Far too often I get calls from constituents furious that elevators at the uptown A and 1 train stations are down. It is unacceptable. This is an issue that troubles thousands across our city and I am proud to join TransitCenter in demanding a change.”

“The state’s negligence and underfunding of the MTA has directly led to the current crisis and the suffering of countless New Yorkers,” said Senator Michael Gianaris, author of the ‘Better

Trains, Better Cities' plan that would provide billions in funding to meet the MTA's needs. "One of the consequences of this mismanagement is the inaccessibility of our subway stations."

"The subway is essential for many people to be able to move around New York City, and having limited access to it can drastically curtail New Yorkers' quality of life. Americans with disabilities deserve the same freedom of movement in society that others have, and I am fully supportive of efforts to improve accessibility in the system. Our goal should not be partial accessibility at "key stations" but full accessibility for all New Yorkers, and I hope to continue to work with TransitCenter to move towards this goal," said State Senator Marisol Alcantara.

"A great city needs accessible public transit, a system that allows people of all physical abilities to get where they need to go. But the hard truth is that our subway system simply does not meet that standard – a fact that is well known to our fellow New Yorkers with disabilities. Although the MTA has met the minimal obligations it agreed to over two decades ago, there's so much more to be done. MTA must commit to a realistic and aggressive plan to continue making progress toward a more accessible system," said State Senator Liz Krueger.

State Senator Brad Hoylman said, "Improving accessibility to public transport is one of the most effective steps we can take to improve the lives of differently-abled New Yorkers. I'm grateful to TransitCenter for bringing attention to this pervasive yet overlooked form of discrimination and look forward to working with them to making the dream of equal access a reality."

"Our transportation system is used by many different people, but it is time to open it up to even more New Yorkers by improving the accessibility of our trains and buses. We should aim to take away every impediment that has prevented the disabled from using mass transit," said State Senator James Sanders

"New Yorkers deserve a dependable transit system. Unfortunately, for many individuals, the current subway system is not fully accessible," said State Assemblymember Yuh-Line Niou. "My office has received dozens of constituent complaints about inaccessible subway stations throughout my district. Seniors and disabled New Yorkers must not be left behind, which is why I join advocates and my colleagues in pushing for a more accessible subway system for all, and I look forward to working with the MTA to improve our transit here in New York."