

April 7, 2020

TransitCenter - Riders Alliance - New York Communities for Change - Tri-State Transportation Campaign - Community Voices Heard - New York Immigration Coalition - Churches United for Fair Housing - Race Forward - NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign - Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development - Mothers on the Move

Statement on Redistributing MTA Service to Prevent Harm to Black and Brown New Yorkers

As the MTA mobilizes spare capacity in the transit system to lessen crowding during the COVID-19 emergency, organizations urge Governor Cuomo and agency leadership to act swiftly to protect public health and safety.

New York, NY - Our organizations are alarmed that crowding on particular MTA bus and train routes poses an imminent public health threat to New Yorkers, especially black and brown communities where the city's essential workforce is concentrated. The MTA is working to mobilize spare capacity elsewhere in the transit system to lessen this crowding, and we urge agency leadership to enact robust changes with all due haste to protect public health and safety.

We request that service be redistributed to the greatest extent possible to lessen crowding on transit and prevent COVID-19 from disproportionately harming New Yorkers who must ride buses and trains during the crisis.

The MTA faces tough constraints during the emergency and cannot field its full workforce due to the spread of COVID-19. The situation is so urgent, and the consequences of delay or inaction so grave, that service changes must be enacted despite these obstacles as quickly as possible. Every available resource must be mobilized to enable transit riders making essential trips to maintain safe physical distance on vehicles.

In New York City, approximately 840,000 people classified as essential workers commute by transit, according to the U.S. Census. People of color account for a greater share of these workers (76 percent) than non-essential transit commuters (63 percent). Due to longstanding public health disparities, people of color are also more likely to live with preexisting conditions like hypertension and diabetes that increase the risk of mortality among COVID-19 patients. Department of Health data on positive COVID-19 cases suggest that transit-reliant communities

of color in the south and west Bronx, central Queens, and central and east Brooklyn are already suffering from high rates of exposure to the virus.

This Monday, the MTA added bus and subway service to alleviate crowding in the Bronx. We applaud this step and urge further measures to redistribute service throughout the city. By acting fast to shift service where it is needed most, the MTA can help minimize spread of COVID-19 and reduce harm in communities that are especially vulnerable to the outbreak.

Maximum prevention requires coordination of all MTA operating divisions -- bus, subway, and the regional railroads – to disperse riders making essential trips. We believe the most immediate relief is likely to come via reallocating bus service.

Bus operators have reported that some routes are running with almost no riders, while others, such as those serving hospitals, remain too crowded for passengers to maintain a safe distance. This suggests there is capacity in the system that can quickly be repurposed.

With fare data no longer a meaningful metric of bus ridership, we expect bus operators to have unique insights and a keen sense for what should be done. In other cities, close coordination between labor and management, including personal visits and routine check-ins by transit agency executives at depots, has proven essential to making rapid service changes in response to COVID-19.

We urge in the strongest terms that service be redistributed as quickly as possible from lightly-used, non-essential bus routes to essential routes that still have substantial ridership, and, where feasible, to use bus service to relieve subway crowding.

Last week, Governor Cuomo and the MTA acted decisively to supply transit workers with much-needed respiratory masks. The same decisiveness and rapid action applied to the urgent public health concern of transit crowding will slow the spread and save lives.

Signed,

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