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Two New Reports Answer Question on Millions of Commuters' Minds: Can Public Transit Be Safe During the Pandemic?

Advocates, labor leaders call for federal support for transit systems struggling to operate amid COVID-related funding shortfalls, highlight need for equitable, clean energy transit investment in joint press conference from Green For All & Tri-State Transportation Campaign

National [6/17/2020] - Two new reports released today highlight the growing crisis for transit agencies as ridership continues to slump amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The reports found that transportation advocates and labor unions across the country are concerned about transit agency readiness for states to reopen amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The reports -- **Green For All's "[Securing Safe Transit: Before and After COVID-19](#)"** and **Tri-State Transportation Campaign's "[Back on Board: A Guide to Safe\(r\) Transit in the Era of COVID-19](#)"** -- address concerns that the economic recession may delay plans to transition public transit vehicles to lower-carbon fuels and zero-emission technologies as well as provide 53 science-based safety recommendations, including immediate interventions and longer-term solutions, as states reopen and more riders return to public transit. The primary goal of both reports is to provide transit agencies with measurable steps they can take to make transit safe for workers and riders, and to rebuild trust for millions of riders who rely on transit.

[Green For All](#), a program of the [Dream Corps](#), and [Tri-State Transportation Campaign](#) hosted a joint virtual press conference this afternoon to bring together leaders across public transportation -- including advocates, labor leaders, scientists and transit experts. Hosts **Nick Sifuentes**, Executive Director of Tri-State Transportation Campaign, and **Michelle Romero**, National Director for Green For All, were joined by a cross section of speakers who addressed the science of COVID-19 and public transit, key interventions to keep riders and operators safe, the need for federal funding and policies to ensure public transit can continue to function, and the importance of electrification and other long-term measures to make transit a bigger part of our climate solution.

The reports and conversation highlighted the impact of declining ridership on transit revenues and the ability of agencies to keep our buses and trains running, the need for federal support to ensure transit can continue to function and implement safety measures amid the pandemic, and the disproportionate exposure faced by communities of color to toxic air pollution due to transportation and other emissions. That exposure to pollutants poses long-term health risks like respiratory and cardiopulmonary illness, which lead to worse health outcomes for those affected by COVID-19. These communities rely most heavily on public transportation as a mobility option.

“As conversations about defunding police departments are happening in cities across the country, we also need to challenge ourselves to tackle other systems that have also failed to adequately serve communities of color, including transportation. Communities of color are disproportionately impacted by transportation sector emissions, and underserved by public transit,” said **Michelle Romero, National Director of Green For All**. “To eradicate systemic and institutional racism, we must stop perpetuating harm with decisions that disregard the needs of people of color, and proactively reinvest financial resources into solutions that increase opportunity, like clean and equitable public transportation.”

“Bringing riders back to transit will require making transit safer *and* convincing riders that transit is in fact safe to ride,” said **Nick Sifuentes, Executive Director of Tri-State Transportation Campaign**. “The good news is that transit agencies don’t need to reinvent the wheel: Vienna, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Paris have higher levels of ridership than the U.S. and, at the same time, no outbreaks of COVID-19 have been traced back to their transit systems. But we know it takes a collective approach to make transit safe. Everyone has to play their part, from riders adhering to science-based safety requirements like mask-wearing and quiet cars, to elected officials funding transit and using the power of the bully pulpit to encourage compliance with safety rules, to businesses providing not just PPE, but paid sick leave and healthcare. This pandemic is a public health crisis that demands a shared public solution.”

Karin Schwarz, Head of External Communications, Wiener Linien (Vienna, Austria) spoke about how Austria has maintained safe operations during the pandemic as ridership has recently climbed to over 65% of normal ridership levels. Speakers highlighted how transit agencies in the US and government actors abroad offer examples of effective responses and best practices that can help to address the risk of COVID-19 exposure on public transit systems.

Additional speakers included **John J. Chin**, Ph.D., Professor of Urban Policy and Planning, Hunter College, City University of New York, **Toph Allen**, Epidemiologist, fm. Senior Data Scientist, EcoHealth Alliance, **Cat Carter**, Executive Director, San Francisco Transit Riders, **Russell Bateman**, Education and Training Administrator, Amalgamated Transit Union, **Nat Lownes**, Coordinating Committee member, Philly Transit Riders Union, and **Michael J. Smart**, Ph.D., AICP, Professor of Urban Planning, Rutgers University.

Green For All’s report, “[Securing Safe Transit: Before and After COVID-19](#),” identifies the needs of transit workers and riders and examines transit policies in California, Illinois, and Massachusetts, three of the five states with the highest reported COVID-19 cases as of mid-May. The report found inconsistent enforcement of social distancing practices aboard public transit vehicles. Service cuts in response to COVID-19 reduced mobility access for some transit dependent riders, including essential workers, and some transit workers have gone without adequate personal protective equipment to safely perform their duties. The report also provides recommendations transit agencies and congressional lawmakers can take to safely reopen public transit. Some of these steps include short-term solutions such as increased funding to cover operational costs, increased service frequency, and reduced or suspended fares, while also looking long-term to electrification and ensuring equitable service for all communities.

Tri-State Transportation Campaign's report, "[Back on Board: A Guide to Safe\(r\) Transit in the Era of COVID-19](#)," discusses the science of how COVID-19 spreads in commuter settings and contains more than 50 science-based safety recommendations for transit agencies, riders, elected officials, and businesses, sourced from published and pre-print studies, public health experts, epidemiologists, social behaviorists, and engineering experts. The report offers urgent fixes and long-range future-proofing for transit agencies and riders to ensure transit is safe, and highlights key cities around the world where buses and trains have been hardened against pandemics and where high ridership has not resulted in COVID-19 spread.

The reports provide recommendations for transit agencies in the midst of COVID-19 based on interviews with over 23 organizations representing labor, transit agencies, scientists, professors, engineers, doctors, transit justice groups, and other community-based groups directly serving vulnerable populations across 11 states. The findings and recommendations provide a useful snapshot of the myriad of challenges and potential solutions that could pave the way for a better, safer public transit future for all.

Read Green For All's report [HERE](#).

Read Tri-State Transportation Campaign's report [HERE](#).

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About Green For All:

Green For All is a national program of Dream Corps, working at the intersection of environmental, economic, and social justice movements to build an inclusive green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty. Learn more at greenforall.org.

About Dream Corps:

Dream Corps closes prison doors and opens doors of opportunity. We bring people together across racial, social, and partisan lines to create a future with freedom and dignity for all. Learn more at thedreamcorps.org.

About Tri-State Transportation Campaign:

Tri-State Transportation Campaign is a 27-year old advocacy organization that fights for an equitable, safe, multi-modal transportation network that provides options and supports the economies of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. TSTC works to fix our commutes, meet our climate goals, stop traffic deaths, and make transportation fair. Learn more at tstc.org.