

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Advocates, NJ Transit Riders Call For Restoration of Services; Current Reduced Service Poses COVID-19 Risks

Amid Coronavirus Pandemic, NJ Transit Must Modify Service To Allow For Social Distancing

STATEWIDE - Advocates and NJ Transit riders are seeking an adjustment of NJ Transit's recent schedule changes over safety concerns. On Monday, March 30, 2020, NJ Transit adjusted its weekday bus service to a special schedule to accommodate essential travel due to the decline in ridership related to COVID-19. This entailed a reduction of bus headways and service halts on certain routes. Riders immediately felt the impact of this change: crowding increased significantly on many routes, exposing essential workers to coronavirus; as a result, riders are seeking an appropriate schedule to fight crowding and continued spread of COVID-19 in essential workforces.

NJ Transit has taken several precautionary measures to protect bus operators and customers. Like many other transit agencies, NJ Transit has implemented rear-door boarding on local buses when the option exists. Additionally, front seats near the bus operator have been made unavailable to allow for proper social distancing for the operator and riders. Furthermore, the agency is cross-honoring bus tickets and passes on all rail lines to provide other travel options for bus customers in the bout against the disease.

Unfortunately, reductions in service and the resultant overcrowding undermine these mitigations and increases exposure risk to riders and operators alike. **Destiny Harkley, an Elizabeth bus rider who has been deemed an essential worker**, echoed what other riders are experiencing: "On some of the buses on the 62, everyone is crammed in the back like sardines. We're trying to protect the safety of everyone, but it seems like some people's health is being valued over others."

Beyond essential workers, a portion of riders depend on NJ Transit to travel to other destinations. "Some of us still have to go to a physical supermarket. For NJ Transit to cancel service is unfair," **Atoya Wilkins, an Elizabeth resident and regular bus rider who was recently furloughed**, highlighted.

While NJ Transit has undertaken measures to protect its employees, as of March 31st, it was reported that 32 NJ Transit workers have tested positive for COVID-19, of which 22

were identified as “front-line transit employees”—those who drive buses, collect train tickets, operate locomotives or clean stations.

In response, Tri-State Transportation Campaign is releasing the following recommendations for NJ Transit to immediately adopt and implement to help reduce the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for riders and employees:

- Provision of personal protective equipment (accompanied by expert guidance on safe usage), including hand sanitizer and gloves, and the release of N95 masks in stock to workers in consistently close physical proximity to other people.
- Clear protocols to maintain safe physical distance at depots, break rooms, rail control rooms, and other workspaces, including shift adjustments that enable fewer workers to occupy spaces at the same time without drastically reducing the available workforce.
- Routine temperature checks at the beginning of each shift to screen for potentially sick workers, and the rapid expansion of COVID-19 testing across the workforce.
- Quarantine and sick leave policies that enable sick and potentially sick workers to stay home with full pay.
- Rear-door boarding, suspension of fare collection, and partitions separating the driver area from the passenger area on buses, while maintaining wheelchair access.
- Disinfecting train crew, bus operator, and rail control workspaces between every shift.
- Hiring infectious disease experts to systematically identify potential points of transmission in the workplace and how to minimize risk.

Tri-State Transportation Campaign also made a similar request of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) earlier this week. This is essential as the region works together in enacting consistent mitigation actions to “flatten the curve” of the COVID-19 spread.

The agency’s operating budget heavily relies on farebox collection. With a 90% drop in ridership, NJ Transit is experiencing a huge revenue loss. Beyond the farebox reductions, there are also a number of additional cost impacts due to COVID-19. Added expenses include the increased cleaning frequency, purchasing of more costly cleaning materials, and paying employees overtime due to new cleaning precautionary measures to and accommodate the growth of unavailable workers due to sickness.

The federal government proved receptive to the public transportation industry’s pleas for a massive cash influx to plug huge budget holes opened by disappearing riders in the wake of the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. In the case of NJ Transit, the agency has been approved for almost \$1.76 billion, which is more than NJ Transit President & CEO Kevin Corbett’s request for about \$1.25 billion. The bill states that funds are:

“to remain available until expended, to prevent, prepare for, and respond to coronavirus...*Provided further*, That notwithstanding subsection (a)(1) or (b) of section 5307 of title 49, United States Code, funds provided under this heading are available for the operating expenses of transit agencies related to the response to a coronavirus public health emergency as described in section 319 of the Public Health Service Act, including, beginning on January 20, 2020, reimbursement for operating costs to maintain service and lost revenue due to the coronavirus public health emergency, including the

purchase of personal protective equipment, and paying the administrative leave of operations personnel due to reductions in service..."

NJ Transit should use these granted funds to restore service to the appropriate level needed to adhere to social distancing protocols and acquire protective gear for its employees. The agency needs to remain focused on providing transportation for essential workers and for customers who rely on the service to get around and ensure the safety of all workers.

"Social distancing is a proven, successful behavior to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and reduce exposure risk but the current level of service is not allowing for that," **said Janna Chernetz, Deputy Director for Tri-State Transportation Campaign.** "NJ Transit must provide all customers and employees with the ability to maintain a safe distance of at least 6 feet. Those who must continue to use NJT because they are essential employees and employees of NJ Transit or because public transit is their only form of transportation should not be forced into unsafe conditions that increase their exposure to this deadly virus."

"NJ essential workers and residents who need to travel for essential needs depend on NJ Transit. They need service that operates consistently, with enough frequency to reduce bus crowding, and to ensure operators are able to perform their jobs in a safe and healthy environment. We urge NJ Transit to maintain frequent and essential service," **said Jessica Cruz, Senior Advocacy Associate for TransitCenter.**

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Tri-State Transportation Campaign is a 25-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.