

ORAL Testimony of Richard Sarles, General Manager
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
before the Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of
Columbia under the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
September 23, 2010

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Chaffetz, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Richard Sarles, General Manager of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, known as WMATA or Metro.

At Metro, there is no higher value than safety. I want the subcommittee and our riders to know that we recognize that our long-term success depends on our ability to build a safety culture that is dedicated to prevention and continual improvement. Reorienting our safety culture in this fundamental way will require enduring, consistent commitment, from the top all the way through the organization. We also recognize that it takes years to become engrained, but want to assure you that we have begun putting the foundation in place.

What is being done? First, as outlined during my testimony on April 21 to the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, I have developed and we have made significant progress in implementing a six-month action plan to move Metro forward in addressing our greatest challenges, which I see as: safety, service reliability, and financial stability.

These are the fundamental areas Metro has focused on for the past five months. A full update on each of them is in my written testimony, but I want to take time today to highlight our progress to improve safety and our safety culture.

Because the cornerstone of any successful safety program is an ability to identify and prevent hazards before incidents occur, we have strengthened our safety department, building it with a team that has more than 230 years of safety experience. Appointed by the Metro Board of Directors, Chief Safety Officer James Dougherty leads the team and reports directly to me, as well as provides at least monthly updates to the Board of directors on our safety progress, including our work to comply with oversight agencies such as the NTSB.

With respect to recommendations we have received from oversight agencies, Metro has worked closely with the Tri-State Oversight Committee (TOC) to develop Corrective Action Plans (CAPs) in response to findings from both external and internal audits and investigations. To date, we have closed 223 CAPs since 2004. Currently 33 CAPs remain open. I have communicated to Metro staff that continuing to close CAPs is a top priority.

To enlist the help of our employees — they are our eyes and ears on safety — we established an anonymous hotline for reporting concerns. Additionally, the Board of Directors has reinforced our whistleblower protection policy. We have also initiated discussions with our largest union on how to encourage reporting of near-misses

without punitive consequences. To give our employees the safety skills they need on the job, we have expanded safety training throughout the organization. And to ensure that we are making progress internally on establishing a safety culture, we conducted a safety culture survey of employees to establish a benchmark from which to measure our progress. Ninety seven percent of Metro's 10,000 employees completed the survey.

At the same time, we are putting tools in place to identify hazards and monitor our progress in resolving them. We have developed a Safety Measurement System to track all safety-related incidents, investigations and corrective actions.

Our commitment to a new safety culture cannot be accomplished without a commensurate financial commitment. The WMATA Board anticipated this by including \$6.9 million in Metro's operating budget to address FTA audit recommendations. The Board also established a \$5 billion six-year capital spending plan, the largest capital budget since the completion of the rail system, to ensure we can make needed equipment and infrastructure safety improvements. More specifically, the Board dedicated more than \$30 million over the next three years in Metro's capital budget to address recommendations received from the NTSB.

While we work on reinforcing our safety culture, we have taken dozens of other actions to comply with NTSB recommendations. Now I would like to turn to the work we are doing to respond to each of the NTSB recommendations associated with the June 22 accident.

1. **Parasitic Oscillation.** We have already replaced track circuit modules at 34 of the 103 locations, increased the frequency of our inspections, and the loss of shunt review will continue twice daily until the testing is completed on the real-time alert system.

2. **Improving Internal Communications.** I developed a cross-functional committee that is developing procedures to ensure clear communication and document receipt of all technical bulletins and other safety-related information.

3. **Wayside Communications.** We are currently working to identify all locations throughout the rail system where unnecessary wayside communication equipment exists, and are developing a plan to disable and/or remove it.

4. **Safety Analysis.** With the Board's approval, we have retained an independent firm to perform a rigorous safety analysis of the automatic train control system and provide recommendations. Once the analysis is complete, we will address the recommendations.

5. **Cable Insulation Resistance Testing.** Test procedures and standards are in development and should be ready in November 2010. The repair of defects is scheduled to begin July 2011 and continue for three years.

6. **Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Final Report.** All FTA audit findings related to Metro were addressed and labeled as "open acceptable" by FTA officials, which means the FTA has reviewed and accepted the proposed actions.

7. **Operational Data on On-Board Recorders.** The review of operational data from on-board event recorders will be incorporated into monthly senior staff

meetings. Local 689 union representatives will be invited to participate.

8. **Non-Punitive Safety Reporting Program.** We established an anonymous hotline, and reinforced our whistleblower protection policy. We have also started discussions with Local 689 on a non-punitive near miss reporting program.

9. **Hazard Identification & Hazard Management.** Monthly, Metro's Executive Safety Committee reviews safety audits and open corrective action plans, and takes the necessary steps to address corrective actions in a timely manner.

10. **Removal of 1000 Series Cars.** On July 26, 2010 we awarded a contract to Kawasaki to satisfy our top safety priority, replacement of the 1000 series railcars.

11. **Installation and Maintenance of On Board Event Recorders.** A plan has been developed to equip and maintain the 4000 and 1000 series cars with onboard event recorders.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, at Metro there is no higher value than safety. We want riders to know that we recognize that our long-term success depends on our ability to change our safety culture to one dedicated to prevention and continual improvement. Establishing a new safety culture in this fundamental way will require enduring, consistent commitment, from the top all the way through the organization. The change will take years to become engrained, but we have begun putting the foundation in place.

In the last year, Metro has faced a number of challenges, and there are more to come. But we also have forged better partnerships with the agencies that provide safety

oversight, and, with their help, and the continued leadership of our Board, we are on a path to continual improvement of safety and service reliability.