

Statement for the Record
Riders' Advisory Council, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
Diana M. Zinkl, Chair
Before the
Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
United States House of Representatives
July 14, 2009

Dear Chairman Lynch, Ranking Member Chaffetz and Members of the Subcommittee,

First, let me offer my condolences and the condolences of all Members of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) Riders' Advisory Council (R.A.C.) and Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) to the families and communities of those who lost their lives and suffered injuries in last month's tragic accident on the redline.

The R.A.C. and AAC adopted a joint resolution offering the sympathies of our members to those directly impacted by the accident.

WHEREAS the Riders' Advisory Council and the Accessibility Advisory Committee represent riders of Metro throughout the region; and

WHEREAS eight passengers and one employee died and at least 80 passengers were injured on June 22, 2009;

Therefore, be it *RESOLVED* that the Riders' Advisory Council and the Accessibility Advisory Committee offer their condolences to the families and communities of the deceased and injured.

As rider representatives, Members of the Council believe it is important both to learn the causes of the June 22nd accident and take steps to prevent such a tragedy in the future, both here at WMATA and on other systems. We understand that the investigation will take months, and are encouraged that WMATA is taking steps to ensure rider safety in the interim.

Customer Communications

At our July 1, 2009, meeting, the R.A.C. discussed customer communications during unplanned service disruptions, focusing on recent service disruptions on the Red line and Green line and at the Pentagon Rail Station. We had concerns based on reports of delayed or ambiguous

communications to both passengers on the rail system and riders who had not yet entered the system during unplanned service disruptions. These reports came from R.A.C. and AAC Members, direct input to our Members from the public, and press accounts of customer communications in the hours after the red line accident. Allison Hall, the Assistant Superintendent for Customer Operations in WMATA's Rail Operations Control Center, provided the briefing on WMATA operations.

During the discussion R.A.C. members made a number of suggestions on how to improve customer communications during service disruptions. These suggestions include infrastructure improvements, as well as encompassing a range of operational changes and public education opportunities.

Infrastructure Improvements

With regard to communications infrastructure, the R.A.C. has on several occasions voiced concerns with the quality of audio equipment and audio announcements in rail cars. In older cars, train drivers are responsible for many audio announcements, including routine stop announcements, due to equipment limitations. Equipment quality and the driver's accent or voice quality can further affect the ability of riders to understand announcements, even under the best circumstances. Improved audio systems in rail cars, with automated announcements, that could be controlled from a central location would enable WMATA to better communicate to passengers on rail cars in emergency situations, provide more information during service disruptions, and improve routine communications to rail passengers as well.

Operational Changes

R.A.C. Members made a number of suggestions for operational changes to improve the quality of information that reaches the riding public during service disruptions.

- Vary language in verbal and written announcements in stations, on trains, on the website, in e-alerts, on phone lines, to distinguish between types and extent of service disruptions—service delays versus suspended service, and, when possible, identify the length of the disruption.

- Consciously develop plain language approach to service disruption announcements, avoiding the use of “jargon” unfamiliar to riders.
- In major disruption situations, alter audio announcements and PID notices schedule to continuously repeat updates on the disruption and information about alternate routes—including bus options—in stations at frequent intervals.
- Frequent, redundant announcements on PID notices and over audio are important for riders with visual or auditory disabilities, who do not have a line of sight to a PID sign, or who may speak but not read English.
- Make broader use of the wireless microphones in rail stations to make announcements during unplanned disruptions.
- Hold buses or add buses, particularly on limited service commuter routes, to allow passengers traveling through delays to reach their bus and final destination.

Educating the Public

Additionally, R.A.C. Members acknowledge that passengers must prepare themselves for the unexpected. WMATA can assist by educating passengers ahead of time about the value of preparing themselves for service disruptions, and how to prepare themselves—including what to expect in rail stations, planning alternate routes, and where and how to obtain updated information.

The R.A.C. has provided input to Metro in the past on customer communications during unplanned service disruptions, including emergency situations. One veteran R.A.C. member noted significant improvement in recent years in the quality of WMATA’s communications during unplanned service disruptions. However, in light of communications issues identified during recent disruptions, we hope that the Authority will consider the suggestions above as a way to further minimize the effect of service disruptions on the riding public.

We are also aware that media relations and the transit police have designated roles or potential roles in service disruptions and look forward to working with those staff as well. In addition to unplanned service disruptions, R.A.C. members are also interested in how planned changes in

service are conveyed to affected communities. I hope the R.A.C. and WMATA will continue this dialogue on customer communications for the benefit of all riders.

Passenger Safety

During 2007, following a number of accidents involving WMATA employees, passengers and bystanders, the R.A.C. has several discussions with WMATA staff regarding safety in WMATA operations. R.A.C. Members at that time expressed concerns and made a number of suggestions. Among those suggestions were increasing training for operators and including WMATA-oriented training in the local Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) programs.

Thank you for your attention to this very important matter. Your oversight of WMATA is appreciated and the R.A.C. is happy to be of assistance to you at any time.

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2009 Chair
WMATA Riders' Advisory Council