



## **Transit Forward Philadelphia Joins National Alliance To Tell White House: Transit Workers Need Better Protection From COVID-19**

*Transit Forward Philadelphia, a broad alliance of labor, business, and community advocates demand White House and CDC supply better protective equipment and guidance to safeguard the transit workforce who ensure other essential workers can provide medical care, food, and basic necessities.*

Philadelphia, PA - Transit Forward Philadelphia has joined dozens of unions, business groups, economic justice organizations, and local transit advocates from across the nation requesting Vice President Mike Pence and Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, strengthen federal coordination to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for transit workers.

As of this week, the coronavirus has claimed the lives of nearly 100 transit workers in the United States, including four in the Philadelphia region.

The victims include Theodore Nixon from the Elmwood Trolley Depot; Phillip Williams of the Southern Depot; Michael Holt, a bus operator from the Midvale Depot; and Michael Hill, a Regional Rail operator.

The federal government can and must take stronger steps to prevent such loss of life.

Bus and train operators, maintenance workers, and cleaning staff at transit agencies in the Philadelphia region are putting their lives on the line as they enable essential travel and ensure the continued provision of food, medical care, and other basic goods and services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without strong federal coordination to procure PPE for transit workers, they face needless risks on the job.

Based on guidance from infectious disease experts, Transit Forward Philadelphia demands consistent provision of N95 masks and other protective gear for frontline transit workers whose duties put them in close proximity to passengers, or require exposure to hazardous disinfectants. Transit Forward Philadelphia also urges the CDC to issue stronger guidance for SEPTA and other transit agencies, including recommendations on how to ventilate transit vehicles to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission.



These measures must be put in place to protect the transit workforce, which in turn will strengthen the overall effort to control the pandemic and minimize the spread of COVID-19. Nearly 3 million Americans classified as essential workers typically commute on transit, according to a TransitCenter analysis of U.S. Census data.

Protective gear for transit workers will have a strong multiplier effect, since reducing risk will increase the availability of the transit workforce, leading to greater provision of transit service, less crowding on transit vehicles, and lower rates of transmission among transit riders and thus the general population.

Transit Forward Philadelphia also supports the safety requests put forward by Transport Workers Union Local 234. In particular, supporting TWU's call for SEPTA to compensate workers who die as a result of the coronavirus and deem these deaths as work-related injuries, entitling their eligible heirs to workers' compensation benefits.

The alliance signing on to the letter reflects the broad public interest in protecting transit workers, encompassing labor, business, transportation, economic justice, environmental, and community-based organizations from dozens of states.

Supply chain issues affect every industry seeking protective gear. However, the need for transit workers is so urgent, and the consequences of further delay so dire, that federal action must be pursued as soon as possible. These protections will save the lives of transit workers, as well as the lives of nurses, doctors, food distribution workers, and other essential workers who rely on transit.

*The full letter, including list of recommendations and signatories, is attached.*

##

April 22, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence  
Vice President of the United States

Dr. Deborah Birx  
Coronavirus Response Coordinator, White House Coronavirus Task Force

Dr. Anthony Fauci  
Director, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Dear Vice President Pence, Dr. Birx, and Dr. Fauci:

Scott Ryan, 41, a bus operator at Community Transit in Snohomish County, Washington, died of coronavirus on March 26.

Patrick Patoir, an MTA worker in New York for 33 years, died of coronavirus on March 30 at the age of 57.

Jory “Jay” Bohanan, a Santa Clarita, California, bus driver, died of coronavirus on March 30.

Jason Hargrove, 50, a Detroit bus operator, died of coronavirus on April 1.

Eugenia Weathers, a school bus driver in Lexington, Kentucky for 17 years, died of coronavirus on April 4.

Michael Hill, a rail conductor in Philadelphia and 30-year SEPTA veteran, died of coronavirus on April 15.

Bus and train operators, maintenance workers, and cleaning staff at transit agencies around the country are risking their lives as they enable essential travel and ensure the continued provision of food, medical care, and other basic goods and services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many are doing so despite lacking access to adequate personal protective equipment (PPE).

Our organizations urgently request a more coordinated federal response to supply transit workers with necessary protective equipment, as well as stronger guidance from the CDC on how to safely equip transit workers and work environments (see recommendations below).

PPE is critical to the health and safety of the transit workforce. Additionally, protective gear for transit workers will have a strong multiplier effect, since reducing risk will increase the availability of the transit workforce, leading to greater provision of transit service, less crowding on transit vehicles, and lower rates of transmission among transit riders and thus the general population.

Already, transit workers have had to cope with too much death and avoidable exposure to COVID-19. In New York City, transit workers have died at three times the combined rate of the city's police and fire departments.

Without stronger measures in place, the transit workforce will face unacceptable risks, and the overall effort to control the pandemic and minimize the spread of COVID-19 will be weakened.

Even with reduced ridership, bus and train operators face an elevated risk of exposure as they transport essential workers within enclosed vehicles. Better protective gear will reduce these risks and save the lives of transit workers.

With fewer transit workers exposed, agencies will be able to maintain more service hours, reducing crowding on transit vehicles and improving safety for everyone on board.

In addition, maintenance workers and cleaning staff work with surfaces that have high contact rates and potential for exposure. They are also being asked to clean with potent chemicals and need to be protected from any associated long-term health risks.

Some agencies are mobilizing to provide PPE, but the response is inconsistent. Many agencies are not providing any protective face covering, for example. In Philadelphia and Los Angeles, agencies have required all bus operators to use their compartment's transparent protective barrier to isolate them from the space passengers occupy, but other agencies don't have buses equipped with these barriers. Cleaning staff lack the necessary hazard suits, masks, and gloves to work safely with disinfectants that may have long-lasting negative impacts on health.

The CDC issued guidance on April 7 for transit operators, maintenance workers, and station staff, but the recommendations do not fully address the protective needs of these essential workers.

Given the level of exposure faced by transit workers and the cascading effects of failing to protect them, the federal government must act to supply this equipment.

We recognize that supply chain issues affect every industry. However, the need is so urgent, and the consequences of further delay so dire, that action must be taken as soon as possible. We urge the federal government to coordinate with transit agency leaders to provide robust protective equipment to safeguard transit worker health and safety.

Based on our consultation with occupational health and safety experts versed in the transmission of COVID-19, we request the following standard of PPE provision for transit workers.

Bus and train drivers:

- N95 masks for bus and train operators, as well as strong public guidance directing transit riders to wear face masks or coverings, and the provision of face masks at transit stops and stations
- Gloves (with instruction on use and effectiveness)

- Disinfectant wipes
- Hand sanitizer
- Plastic protective barriers to separate operators from passengers
- Safer ventilation on buses, so fresh air continuously flows from the front of the vehicle and out the back, instead of stale air recirculating inside the bus

Cleaning and maintenance staff:

- Hazard suits
- N95 masks, to protect against inhaling harsh chemicals
- Gloves
- Goggles

Depot staff:

- N95 masks
- Gloves
- Hand sanitizer

Thank you for your prompt attention to this urgent matter of public health and safety.

Signed,

TransitCenter  
David Bragdon, Executive Director

Amalgamated Transit Union (TWU)  
John A. Costa, International President

Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen  
Jerry Boles, President

Community Change  
Dorian T. Warren, President

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## **California**

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## **Illinois**

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