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
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Amalgamated Transit Union (TWU)
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Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen
Jerry Boles, President

Community Change
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Circulate San Diego
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San Francisco Transit Riders
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Mile High Connects
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Rural Women's Health Project
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Tampa Bay Chamber of Commerce
Nicholas Glover, Vice President, Government Affairs & Advocacy

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Blue Planet Foundation
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Center for Neighborhood Technology
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Metropolitan Planning Council
Audrey Wennink, Director of Transportation
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Ride New Orleans
Alex Posorske, Executive Director

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Denisse Guitarra, Maryland Conservation Advocate
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Baltimore Transit Equity Coalition
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Central Maryland Transportation Alliance
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Transportation Riders United (TRU)
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Minnesota

East Metro Strong
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Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce
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Move Minnesota
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Our Streets Minneapolis
Ashwat Narayanan, Executive Director
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Missouri

BikeWalkKC
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Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce
Cathy Bennett, Senior Vice President of Public Policy

**New Jersey**

Regional Plan Association
Tom Wright, President & CEO

**New York**

Buffalo Transit Riders United
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Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA (PCAC)
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Riders Alliance
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Tri-State Transportation Campaign
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Local 391 Teamsters
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SMART 1715 Legislative Representative
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Sustain Charlotte
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Oklahoma

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City of Springfield
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Pittsburghers for Public Transit
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