



Pat Foye | AP Photo

With death toll hitting 83, the MTA contemplates a memorial for its Covid fallen

By DANA RUBINSTEIN | 04/22/2020 02:42 PM EDT

Eighty-three MTA workers have died from the coronavirus — a remarkable, rising death toll that has elicited a mournful and defensive response from agency leaders.

On Wednesday, black-clad officials recited the litany of their dead, name by name, in a ceremony reminiscent of the Sept. 11 readings at Ground Zero.

They also patted themselves on the back for the extensive efforts they have taken to protect workers, efforts some workers say came too late.

“I’m proud that we’ve been the most aggressive transit agency in the country in acting quickly and decisively to protect our workforce,” said Sarah Feinberg, the interim president of New York City Transit, whose staff has borne the brunt of the fatalities.

In an interview, John Samuelsen, Transport Workers Union's international president, praised the MTA for being ahead of other systems, but he also gave it a middling grade for trusting the federal government's health guidance in the first place. The mistakes federal authorities made after Sept. 11, when then-Environmental Protection Agency head Christine Todd Whitman erroneously told workers the air was safe to breathe, should have engendered some doubt, he argued.

“We have so many workers who are sick now [with] weird cancers and that kind of thing, because the federal government said the air was safe to breathe,” Samuelsen said.

The MTA's largely male and middle-aged workforce may make the agency especially vulnerable to the virus. Data emerged as early as January showing older men were particularly vulnerable. But, relying on federal and World Health Organization guidance, the MTA only announced it would hand out large quantities of masks on March 27. In early March, officials actually forbade workers from wearing masks they'd brought from home, citing official health guidance. The MTA eventually changed its position — before federal authorities did.



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“I regret that the CDC and the World Health organization gave the advice that they did, and as you know, we changed our policies prior to the World Health Organization and the CDC changing,” said MTA Chairman and CEO Pat Foye, following the agency’s monthly board meeting. “I do regret they gave that advice to the entire country.”

A few minutes later, a reporter asked when the MTA realized its workforce may have been more vulnerable to this disease than the general population.

“Look, people who are older, people who have medical issues are at risk to ... flu, to not only epidemics and pandemics, but to general health issues,” said Foye. “And the workforce has performed heroically under the circumstances.”

The MTA’s death toll includes workers certified as having died from the disease by family members or the state health department. The universe of Covid-19 deaths may, therefore, be larger.

With the exception of one Metro-North worker, the death toll falls entirely within the realm of MTA subways and buses, a 55,000 strong workforce. That indicates the death rate within that workforce is 151 out of 100,000. New York City’s overall death rate is 123 per 100,000.

In an acknowledgment of the gravity of the situation, the MTA on Wednesday formally approved \$500,000 in death benefits for the families of employees felled by the coronavirus. Foye also said the authority would erect a monument to its scores of workers who have died, once the immediate health crisis eases.

The MTA is facing a longer-term financial crisis that Foye said is unrivaled in the history of the agency, which survived the economic turmoil of the 1970s. Thanks to the system's 90 percent drop in ridership and 62 percent drop in tolled crossings, the agency is anticipating a loss of between \$4.7 billion and \$5.9 billion in revenues. It's also expecting a drop of nearly \$2 billion in state and local tax revenue.

The system recently got some \$4 billion in federal aid and is now requesting \$4 billion more.

New York City is uniquely transit-reliant among American cities, and officials have said the system must keep running to carry nurses and grocery store workers and other essential workers to the front lines.

Shoring up the MTA's financial viability is in fact of national interest, officials argued, because it enables the existence of the country's financial capital.

"Basically, the MTA is going broke to help save New York," said Lisa Daglian, the executive director of the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA.

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