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TRANSIT

MTA's Pandemic Preparations Not Running as Planned, Union Charges

BY JOSE MARTINEZ | MAR 31, 2020, 9:30AM EDT



An MTA worker wears a surgical mask on the Fulton Street A/C platform. | Photo: Ben Fractenberg/THE CITY

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Preparations for a pandemic have been taking shape for years at New York City Transit, with the agency outlining plans to protect workers and riders while stockpiling supplies.

But as the coronavirus crisis escalates — with seven MTA employees among those to die from COVID-19 — transit union leaders say workers are deeply concerned over a shortage of protective equipment.

“It looks good on paper, but in a lot of cases, it’s not happening — I have no wipes, I can’t get N95 masks and it’s crazy,” said JP Patafio, a vice president for TWU Local 100. “What good is a plan if you’re not going to take stuff off the shelf when you need it?”

THE CITY obtained a 2012 copy of New York City Transit’s pandemic plan to “prevent or minimize illness among employees,” to limit service disruptions and maintain “an environment that is safe for both our employees and our customers.”

National Issue

But a former MTA chief safety officer said the plan — similar to ones transit agencies across the country put in place after the 2009 swine flu pandemic — assumed a “rapid national response.”

“These plans don’t contemplate, nor were they required to contemplate, a sustained nationwide response with the associated shortages of supplies that we are currently seeing,” said David Mayer, the MTA’s chief safety officer from December 2014 to June 2018. “I don’t think these plans expected the level of service cuts, nor the duration of response that we are experiencing.”

The “Pandemic Plan Policy Instruction” maps out the need for subway and bus

service reductions due to rising absenteeism, instructs transit workers to limit face-to-face contact with the public and not shake hands.



Riders are now blocked from getting too close to MTA bus drivers. | Ben Fractenberg/THE CITY

The document details MTA stockpiles of gloves, hand sanitizer, wipes and N95 respirator masks for certain employees.

It calls for disinfecting “shared workspace” in the transit system — everything from steering wheels, fareboxes and grab rails in thousands of buses to control panels in a train operator’s cab to door knobs, counter space and the window slot in token booths.

The plan also calls for cleaning “public space” on trains, buses and in stations, such as touchpads and screens on MetroCard vending machines, benches, emergency exit bars and turnstiles.

‘An Epic Fail’

The 2012 plan includes keeping a six-week supply of protective equipment. MTA officials say they maintained the stockpiles, but workers have complained they can't get protective equipment.

Abbey Collins, an MTA spokesperson, said the agency has issued 190,000 wipes to subway workers.

After this story was published, she offered a more detailed response of how much hand sanitizer has been distributed among New York City Transit's nearly 50,000 workers.

Those include:

- 5,000 one-gallon bottles
- 1,000 seven-ounce bottles
- 7,000 four-ounce bottles
- 25,000 two-ounce bottles

"We have been working with TWU Local 100 on these issues since day one," Collins said. "The MTA is adhering to the guidance of the CDC, State Department of Health and public health authorities. We're doing everything we can to protect our employees."

John Samuelson, president of Transport Workers Union International, said the MTA was "ahead of most transit agencies in terms of recognizing the need for constant disinfecting of the system."

"But on the [personal protective equipment] side, it's ridiculous — it's been an epic fail," he added.


The union for subway and bus workers has, for weeks, pushed the MTA to provide transit workers with more masks. The agency announced Friday that it would make 75,000 masks available to employees who want them.


Memorandum

 New York City Transit

3/19/2020

Manhattan and Bronx
Surface Transit
Operating Authority

ATTN: BUS
OPERATORS
AS PER AGM 
FACEMASKS ARE
NOT TO BE ISSUED TO
YOU.

 A MTA memorandum posted in a Brooklyn bus depot states drivers are not getting masks in response to the coronavirus crisis. | Obtained by THE CITY

THE CITY detailed last week how two Brooklyn bus depots together had more than 4,500 single-use N95 respirators sitting in stock, as many bus drivers scrambled to supply their own masks. The push for more supplies goes beyond masks, union leaders said.

“We don’t get wipes at the window,” Patafio said. “What are we waiting for, the next pandemic?”

Samuelsen said workers are constantly asking him about supplies.

“We’re still short on gloves,” he said. “We’ve got people out there looking for disinfectant.”

A ‘Blueprint’ for Action

Collins described the pandemic plan as a “blueprint” to guide the agency’s evolving response during a crisis in which mass transit ridership has plummeted.

“The MTA’s planning efforts lay the groundwork for responses from everything from pandemics to extreme weather and we are currently working around the clock to tackle the COVID-19 public health crisis,” she said in a statement. “The MTA’s top priority is customer and employee safety and that principal guides every decision we make during this unprecedented event.”

Mayer, the former safety officer, said transit agencies around the country will likely alter their pandemic preparation in the future.

“Once the current crisis is over, I anticipate the national guidelines for these plans will be revisited,” he told THE CITY.

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