

**Statement of Mark Henry, Chair, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) NYS
Legislative Conference Board & President/Business Agent, ATU Local 1056
to City Council Committee on Oversight and Investigations on “Disparate Impacts
of COVID-19 on Communities of Color,” April 30, 2020**

The impact of COVID-19 highlights the concerns in communities of color and among members of ATU Local 1056. Our members operate and maintain NYC Transit bus routes serving Queens with some routes extending into The Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan.

To delve deeper into the issues, I could look at the disparity of services, medical centers, health care, hospital closures, quality of school education, physical fitness, curriculums, public services, shopping, groceries shopping, types restaurants, and housing, but mainly public transportation; the inequality in every one of these categories is immense. Our communities are marginalized and undervalued.

Our members are a diverse “community of color.” Many members develop a lot of the illnesses once they have come on the job, which this virus preys upon. “Pre-existing conditions” — high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes plus inadequate healthy food options — make African Americans more vulnerable to the virus. Indeed, at 127 per 100,000, the known death rate for black New Yorkers more than doubles the rate for whites.

To address these problems, we need to start with collecting real data for each demographic. We need people of every ethnicity especially the black communities to talk to their state health departments, and their local health departments, their city and county health departments to make sure their leaders are collecting that data so we understand the true toll and impact this has on communities of color first and foremost.

Nonetheless, we still know little about COVID-19 other than how it attacks vulnerable populations, that the symptoms vary and that we experience the devastating aftermath of this virus. My members are primarily Transit workers i.e. “essential workers” or “emergency workers” depending on what Stimulus program denies usage of that entitlement. Our local has suffered six (6) lives lost due to this virus; six families and countless friends and co-workers have been impacted. Another 103 members of our local are either positive or in some type of quarantine status. This virus attacks the lungs and other vital organs which makes my members particularly vulnerable, working against an unknown assailant virus that has a limitless time frame, according to health experts.

Transit Workers are unable to shelter in place – at home, we require a workplace that provides the minimum “at home” shelter or better “shelter” at the workplace. Transit workers are exposed to all dangers and still shown great resiliency mentally and physically under uncertain conditions.

Unfortunately, the authority following CDC directives, was extremely slow to protect the members of Local 1056 and other MTA bus, subway and rail workers. Just providing proper PPE was an issue but could have saved a life. The Transit Authority later lamented that decision when the first Transit Workers died as a result of COVID -19.

The authority began to provide the needed PPE to workers and initiated effective measures suggested by the unions (Cleaning of Equipment and workspaces, social distancing in workplace, rear boarding, and blocking of first several rows of bus, requiring passengers to wear masks).

Cleaning protocols are needed; ATU supports the recently mandated a 24 hour cleaning schedule for public transit equipment, also address the serious homeless problem on buses – yes also on buses – and trains as these individuals seek shelter through the mass transit system, to help reduce the spread of the virus through the community. As to public transit overnight subway closures, MTA and authority already “enjoy” shuttle bus replacements where it shuts down parts of system and it should rely solely on its public transit bus operators and not privatize a public service. For an agency strapped for cash, outsourcing work makes absolutely no sense as an answer to any overnight subway closures.

The transit authority remains consistent, not recognizing or minimizing the value of their employee. They seem never to miss an opportunity to demonstrate this! Even when it comes to Government stimulus programs at federal or state level, they carved out their employees from receiving the necessary relief. Pandemic relief in those documents, stimulus laws, must provide relief to our membership. Stress of working in the unknown and still providing for your family adds to the anger and frustration. These workers also merit hazardous pay as “essential workers” with demonstrated recognition.

Focusing on NYC (24/7), especially in the outer boroughs where many transit deserts exist, New York City **needs** public transit to work in order to re-open NYC and allow our city and this nation’s economy to rebound. The best way to kill a neighborhood is to kill its public transit or limit it usage and service. An essential service should not put the public at risk when they use that service. The authority must provide the necessary service level so riders can easily maintain social distancing.

COVID-19 has shown all the economic pitfalls, adverse impacts of cost-cutting and elimination of programs over past years...its amazing that your zip code could impact your quality of life.

We need a protected, safe and healthy workforce and workplace to provide levels of service needed to assure the riding public they can safely return to work via public transit. The workers needed to sustain the rebound in services, support roles, hospitality, retail, public service, health care, education need safe public transit to return to work in numbers enough to make a difference. Our neighborhoods need to reflect what is necessary to sustain communities of color with a proper lifestyle. Maybe then COVID-19 could be defeated or at least somewhat contained.

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