

**Statement of Mark Henry, Chair, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) NYS
Legislative Conference Board & President/Business Agent, ATU Local 1056
to City Council Committee on Civil Service and Labor supporting Health Coverage
for surviving family members who passed as a result of COVID-19 and classifying
death of municipal employees who died from COVID-19 as line of duty-deaths,
May 5, 2020**

Thank you, Chairman Miller, for this opportunity to present on behalf of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1056. I am Mark Henry, Chair, Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) NYS Legislative Conference Board & President/Business Agent, ATU Local 1056. The impact of COVID-19 had certainly impacted our civil servants. Members of ATU Local 1056 operate and maintain NYC Transit bus routes serving Queens with some routes extending into The Bronx and Manhattan. 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 sorts of dangers and still show great resiliency, mentally and physically, under uncertain conditions. Clearly, nature of our work on the “front lines” providing an essential public service, puts bus operators and maintainers at great public health risk in the face of any pandemic, especially one as deadly as the Coronavirus. Sadly, our local has suffered eight (8) lives lost due to this virus; eight 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 and its sustained activity on surfaces makes my members particularly vulnerable, as they work against an unknown assailant virus that has a limitless time frame, according to health experts that are still studying the virus.

Unfortunately, actions and guidance from the CDC or WHO put our members at this level of risk beyond the scope of their duties; the Transit Authority following CDC directives and not their own Pandemic Plan, acted 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 sat the urgency of 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).

ATU supports the recently mandated 24-hour cleaning schedule for public transit equipment, BUT not a shutdown of the system. The ATU understands essential workers needed for essential business (Hospitals, Groceries, Pharmacies, First Responders, etc.) must be able to commute. The city and state need to address the serious homeless problem on buses – yes also on buses – and trains as these individuals seek shelter through the mass transit system. The ATU understands WE ALL must do our part to reduce the spread of the virus through the communities we serve. MTA and Transit Authority already “utilize” shuttle bus replacements where it shuts down parts of system for repairs and it should rely solely on its public transit bus operators and not privatize a public service. For an agency that must maximize resources, outsourcing work makes absolutely no sense as an answer to any overnight subway closures.

None of these changes replaces our list brothers and sisters; many are the heads of households or the sole provider. The impact on those families is unquestionable, unimaginable, unmeasured and irreplaceable. We can be reasonably certain, if not for their line of work that they swore an oath to serve – providing an essential service – Transportation, these front-line employees – our lost members – would likely have remained with us today. Our workers demand safe work environments and workspaces as much as the riding public. The agency is not providing Pandemic Pay which would be show of support to the day to day worker being at war with the unknown. A compensation of health coverage for that member’s family is a small ask of what has literally been taken as a result of the virus.

The ATU recognizes as do most experts that without a fully functioning transit system, we cannot expect New York City’s – and thus our state and national – economy to fully recover and achieve growth beyond.

In these contexts, ATU supports Chairman Miller’s pre-considered legislation calling for a State law – but should engage the federal government as well – that automatically classifies the deaths of all municipal employees who died from COVID-19 as line-of-duty deaths and to require health insurance coverage for surviving family members of municipal employees who died as a result of a complication related to the coronavirus disease, COVID-19, with the caveat the health insurance coverage legislation also specifically include New York City Transit workers. Let’s recognize these heroes who gave their lives for all of us!

These families deserve the health care and line of duty benefits as a result of us losing their loved serving the City and State of New York.

Thank you. Please be safe and stay protected and wear your masks.

#

*Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1056
211-12 Union Turnpike
Hollis Hills, NY 11364
(718) 949-6444 * www.Local1056.org*

For more information:
Corey Bearak, ATU 1056 Policy & Political Director
(718) 343-6779/ (516) 343-6207

