



RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE

ON HOMELESSNESS IN THE NYC SUBWAY SYSTEM



Background

Each day hundreds of individuals experiencing homelessness in New York City inappropriately seek shelter within the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's (MTA) transit system. Every January, New York City conducts a Point-in-Time count to obtain an unduplicated count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless individuals and families. In 2019, the Point-in-Time count identified **2,178 homeless individuals within the MTA system**, this number was **up by more than 20 percent from the 2018 count of 1,771** and is a higher percentage increase than the overall homeless rate of growth within New York City.¹ This disproportionate upward trend is unacceptable. Homelessness in the subway system is a disservice to both those individuals experiencing homelessness and to the **MTA's 8 million daily riders**.

To date, even after large efforts and investment by the MTA, the problem of homeless individuals inappropriately residing within the transit system persists. As a result, significant portions of the MTA system are functioning as ill-equipped, de facto shelters.

This leads to panhandling and sanitary issues on trains and in stations, which are not appropriate places for New Yorkers to be living. Those experiencing homelessness who inappropriately seek shelter in the transit system are often not connected with agencies and organizations that can provide them with housing services and other supports so many of them need.



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(Up by more than 20% from 2018)

New York City is legally obligated to house all individuals who are experiencing homelessness and request shelter, as well as to provide a broad array of other services. Anyone who is homeless, including those inappropriately seeking shelter within the transit system, can access appropriate shelter services provided by the New York City Department of Homeless Services (NYC DHS).

In addition to these challenges, the MTA is in the midst of a significant reorganization and transformation. This reorganization provides an important opportunity for the MTA to rethink its operations including its response to issues such as homelessness. This is the right time and right opportunity for MTA to evaluate the safety and comfort of its system, its approach to a population in need but inappropriately seeking shelter in the transit system, and to assess its working relationship with partner agencies and other organizations.

MTA and the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) have been tasked with developing a plan to significantly reduce the number of homeless individuals inappropriately seeking shelter in the transit system, including stations such as Penn, Grand Central, and those in Jamaica where homelessness has also impacted commuter lines.

The MTA formed a task force with OTDA, the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH), the Department of Health (DOH), and the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS). This Task Force was charged with delivering a set of recommendations to the MTA Board of Directors for actions to address the growing number of homeless individuals seeking shelter within the MTA system.

MTA's priority is and must remain the safety, security, and comfort of riders, and the efficient operation of the system.

¹ ["NYC Homeless Outreach Population Estimate 2019 Results,"](#) New York City Department of Homeless Services.

The task force's recommendations are:

- 1.** NYS OTDA will continue to deploy emergency teams to deliver enhanced homeless outreach within the transit system and will require the NYC DHS to significantly enhance its existing homeless services on a permanent basis to better address the needs of those who are seeking shelter within the MTA system.
- 2.** MTA will grow its police force by at least 50% to keep the transportation system safe and secure. A portion of this expanded force will support the outreach efforts to help those in need access shelter or other services.
- 3.** MTA will do more to publicize longstanding [MTA Rules of Conduct](#) and to inform the ridership about applicable rules and regulations as well as assistance available for those experiencing homelessness.
- 4.** MTA will work closely and coordinate with OTDA, and other appropriate partners particularly when engaging with individuals inappropriately seeking shelter in the transit system.
- 5.** The taskforce recommends the MTA Office of Inspector General provide oversight of the implementation of these recommendations.

1. NYS OTDA will continue to deploy emergency teams to deliver enhanced homeless outreach within the transit system and will require the NYC DHS to significantly enhance its existing homeless services on a permanent basis to better address the needs of those who are seeking shelter within the MTA system.

As a result of increased need to address homelessness within the transit system, since mid-August OTDA and the MTA have mobilized staff to provide outreach and service connection to individuals in need, as well as coordinate this outreach with MTA efforts to increase enforcement of MTA Rules of Conduct. These emergency outreach teams have engaged with hundreds of individuals each night, making connections to needed services.

This emergency effort has had the dual purpose of enabling OTDA to deliver services immediately in a crisis and to better assess the needs of those who are homeless and inappropriately residing within the transit system. As a result, OTDA has identified key areas for enhanced engagement by NYC DHS including the need for a dramatic increase in consistent outreach during overnight hours. In response:

- On an emergency basis, OTDA will continue to provide direct outreach to individuals seeking shelter in the transit system, including the commuter rails, to help these individuals access needed shelter and services, including mental and physical health needs and services to special populations like homeless Veterans and individuals with developmental disabilities and substance use disorder.
- OTDA will continuously evaluate the need to provide direct services, and will stop providing them when the situation has improved and can be sustained by DHS alone.
- OTDA will dedicate staff resources to inspect homeless outreach efforts of NYC DHS and its contracted providers.
- OTDA will require NYC DHS to significantly enhance their homeless services and to expand overnight outreach within the transit system at locations identified by MTA and OTDA as most critical. NYC DHS will be expected to coordinate this outreach with OTDA outreach staff and MTA efforts to enforce transit Rules of Conduct.
- OTDA will require NYC DHS to make these improvements quickly and will hold NYC DHS to strict performance standards and require regular reporting of performance metrics.
- The MTA will deploy a sufficient number of police to support effective outreach services during overnight hours and ensure safety.

- OTDA and NYC DHS will develop policies and procedures to best provide services to those who are homeless and residing in the transit system, including those that will increase the extent to which these individuals engage in needed services and shelter.
- OTDA, in conjunction with MTA and local partner agencies will develop and establish internal controls to ensure the reported homeless outreach data is complete and accurate. Data will be used to make informed decisions about how best to deliver services and implement changes in real time.
- OTDA will routinely report to the MTA Board on the status of implementation strategies and outcomes associated with OTDA and NYC DHS' outreach to homeless individuals inappropriately residing in the transit system, as well as the ongoing level of MTA's operational support.

2. MTA will grow its police force by at least 50% to keep the transportation system safe and secure. A portion of this expanded force will support the outreach efforts to help those in need access shelter or other services.

- The MTA will grow its police force by recruiting and hiring additional officers in 2019 and 2020.
- The MTA will continually evaluate and redeploy MTA Police in order to ensure the safety of transit workers and riders, including those who are homeless.
- MTA Police will continue its close coordination with the New York City Police Department (NYPD) Transit Bureau to efficiently and effectively serve users of the transit system and to increase the police presence on subway cars.
- MTA Police will enforce the MTA Rules of Conduct. This includes providing a routine presence within the transit system as well as in stations.
- MTA Police will increase enforcement efforts regarding overnight stays on subway cars and panhandling within the transit system. Outreach activities will support this effort by helping those in need access shelter or other services.
- The MTA will coordinate enforcement of the MTA Rules of Conduct with the ongoing effort to reduce fare evasion. This coordination is a critical component to reduce use of the subway for non-approved purposes.

3. MTA will do more to publicize MTA Rules of Conduct and to inform the ridership about applicable rules and regulations as well as assistance available for those experiencing homelessness.

- The MTA will improve compliance with the MTA Rules of Conduct to enhance the rider experience for all customers.
- The MTA will strategically display the Rules of Conduct throughout the transit system.
- The MTA will review New York City Transit, Metro-North Railroad and the Long Island Rail Road Rules of Conduct and propose any needed plain language changes to improve consistency among agencies as needed and to provide clarity regarding the appropriate interpretation of those rules to aid in enforcement.
- The MTA will provide any required training to ensure station employees, including station staff and train operation staff, understand the MTA Rules of Conduct and how to report and/or address any violations.
- Riders and transit workers will be provided information by the MTA that will enable them to report individuals using the transit system for non-approved purposes and to understand meaningful ways to support those experiencing homelessness.
- A media campaign will inform the public that:
 - Panhandling is not permitted on subway platforms or in trains and will advise riders that giving to panhandlers is not the best way to help those in need of assistance.
 - Extensive services are available in New York City to help individuals who are experiencing homelessness and how to best access these services.
- OTDA and other task force agencies will work with the MTA to develop these outreach campaigns and provide appropriate information about resources and services available.

4. MTA will work closely and coordinate with OTDA and other appropriate partners particularly when engaging with individuals inappropriately seeking shelter in the transit system.

The MTA will deploy resources as needed to enable homeless outreach efforts to effectively operate within the MTA system, including MTA leadership and MTA Police. MTA leadership will support NYC DHS' homeless outreach efforts and OTDA's outreach and inspection teams and will ensure a coordinated and effective use of resources to reduce the number of individuals who are experiencing homelessness in the transit system. The MTA will:

- Provide resources to support effective outreach to individuals who are homeless and inappropriately seeking shelter in the transit system.
 - These resources will include deployment of MTA Police to partner with outreach teams and appropriate space to administer the outreach program.
 - The MTA will ensure a sufficient number of police are present to support the effective deployment of outreach staff, including overnight engagement.
- Help coordinate homeless outreach activities across the MTA and with government partners including the NYPD and the NYC DHS.
- Will work collaboratively with OTDA and NYC DHS to amend policies and procedures to improve the effectiveness of outreach efforts.
- Convene regular meetings, in coordination with OTDA New York City Transit Station Managers, representatives from Train Operations, NYPD Transit Bureau, MTA Police, NYC DHS, and contracted social services outreach providers to address challenges, lessons learned, and successful strategies.

5. The Task Force recommends the MTA Office of Inspector General provide oversight of the implementation of these recommendations.

The MTA Inspector General will focus on oversight and evaluation of the implementation of these recommendations and other efforts on a regular basis. As a result of the underperformance of past efforts and the growing crisis, monitoring is clearly required.

The Task Force is pleased to see that the spotlight on this crisis has begun to force long-overdue action within the New York City transit system to improve the transit experience for riders and to help individuals who are experiencing homelessness receive needed services.

The MTA Inspector General's oversight is intended to maximize transparency, ensure improvement in outcomes, and verify that necessary services are delivered in an efficient and effective manner. To ensure sufficient oversight, performance and monitoring controls over the homeless outreach contracts and homeless outreach services on MTA properties, the MTA Inspector General will conduct an annual audit.

Recognizing the severity of the current situation, the MTA and OTDA have already taken action to implement some of these recommendations, including augmenting current outreach services and improving public information associated with services for individuals who are homeless.

The MTA and OTDA recognize that the success of any of these efforts will be rooted in coordination across State and local government agencies as well as the contracted providers already working in this space. MTA and OTDA will work together to establish performance metrics and outcomes that will enable the agencies to measure ongoing progress and remain accountable to the MTA Board of Directors and the general public.

Implementation of these recommendations should make a measurable impact in reducing the number of individuals experiencing homelessness who are seeking shelter in the transit system, improve outcomes and services for individuals in need, and improve the safety and experience for the ridership across New York City.