

Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA

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Public Access Channel A Promising Outlet for Advising MTA Customers About Major Service Disruptions

Using a public access channel during major service disruptions is one of several measures that NYC Transit, the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR), and Metro-North could use to keep customers better updated during major service disruptions, according to a report released today by the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee (PCAC) to the MTA. The report, *Customer Communication and Assistance During Emergencies*, examined the procedures of the MTA operating agencies and other large U.S. transit agencies for communicating with and assisting passengers during incidents that lead to widespread and excessive delays or a partial or complete system shutdown.

"Millions of people put their trust in the MTA agencies every day," said Beverly Dolinsky, executive director of the PCAC. "When something goes wrong, the agencies have an obligation for ensuring that their customers are well-informed about what is happening, what their options are, and what they should do. We undertook the study to assess the agencies' procedures and identify ways in which they can serve passengers better."

Although the study found that the MTA agencies are well-prepared for responding to an emergency, their handling of recent incidents and the results of customer satisfaction surveys indicate that they must continue to focus on this critical task. In January 1998, for example, the LIRR failed to make public address announcements at Penn Station when signal problems significantly delayed service into Jamaica Station. Metro-North initially communicated incorrect information to New Haven Line passengers during an October 1997 power outage along the corridor. In addition, NYC Transit and the LIRR receive low scores in customer satisfaction surveys for public address announcements during delays. Metro-North's score for announcements during delays is lower than it is for announcements during normal service conditions.

The report discusses several measures that the agencies can implement to enhance their outreach efforts. Especially promising is a practice that the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority implemented this year: using a public access cable channel to televise system status news during an emergency. MTA customers would benefit from having access to a constant source of information when problems arise. The report also recommends that NYC Transit expand the hours of its travel information center, which

now closes at 9 PM, and that Metro-North distribute flyers to help passengers find their way to Bronx stations when service is not running from Grand Central Terminal.

"We uncovered some exciting options for improving the quality of information and assistance passengers receive during disruptions," said Ms. Dolinsky. "We hope that the MTA acts upon our recommendations. No matter how well the agencies perform during an emergency, they can always do better."

Copies of the full report are available upon request.

The PCAC serves as the coordinating body for three councils created by the state legislature in 1981: the Long Island Rail Road Commuters Council, the Metro-North Railroad Commuter Council, and the New York City Transit Riders Council. The 35 volunteer members are users of the MTA system and represent the interests of the riders. They are appointed by the Governor upon the recommendation of local elected officials.