**MTA Board Meeting Testimony**

**“Commuter Benefits Relief and Affordability”**

**By Kara Gurl, Research & Comm Associate**

**May 23, 2022**

Good morning! I’m Kara Gurl, Research and Communications Associate at the Permanent Citizens Advisory Committee to the MTA, PCAC.

After a long two years and two months, relief is finally in sight for thousands of riders who had money trapped in commuter benefits accounts. Thanks to the Long Island delegation and Senators Schumer and Gillibrand, bipartisan legislation has been introduced to get riders’ hard-earned money back to them.

It’s past time that riders who may not need to commute as frequently access the hundreds—and in some cases, thousands—of dollars that were stuck in accounts like Wageworks. Our Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council first raised this issue in June of 2020 after it became clear that new work patterns changed by the pandemic weren’t ending anytime soon. Members continued to sound the alarm, and elevated the issue to the federal level. Thanks to their dedication and advocacy, transit riders around the country will be able to access their own wages. The COVID-19 Commuter Benefits Distribution Act will make a difference in the lives and pockets of riders who may need more flexibility to use their funds in a post-pandemic work dynamic.

But there’s still work to be done to bring more financial relief to riders. The legislation leaves room to give commuter benefits funds back to those who have left or lost jobs during the pandemic, and will still require help from the federal government so they can access their own money. In the meantime, we thank you for your work to keep fares affordable with fare discount programs like CityTicket, the 20-trip ticket at a 20% discount, and monthly 10% discount. We fought for these programs because we knew that they would help bring riders back on board, and we’re glad to see that they’ve proven successful. Reliable service and affordable fares are key to showing Metro-North and Long Island Rail Road riders that transit is the best choice.

We’ll continue to advocate to make sure that riders get their commuter benefits relief and the MTA gets long-term, sustainable operating funds. Thank you to the elected officials who have had riders’ backs throughout this pandemic. Thank you.