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U.S. | NEW YORK | TRANSIT

New York MTA Approves Coronavirus Death Benefits Program

Spouses or beneficiaries of employees who die from Covid-19 to receive \$500,000, extended health coverage



MTA officials have faced criticism from some workers who say the authority was slow to respond to the crisis. An MTA worker in the F train as it departed Coney Island in Brooklyn on Monday.

PHOTO: HOLLY PICKETT/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By [Paul Berger](#)

April 22, 2020 5:00 pm ET

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority on Wednesday approved a benefits program for workers who die of Covid-19-related causes as the death toll among its workforce rose to 83.

MTA officials have faced criticism from some workers who say the authority was slow to respond to the crisis. In particular, they are angry that some workers either weren't allowed to wear face masks or weren't provided with them during the first weeks of

March.

The benefit pays \$500,000 to a spouse or beneficiary of a worker who dies because of the new coronavirus. It also provides three further years of health coverage for the person’s spouse and dependents.

The MTA, which also runs two commuter railroads, has 74,000 workers. All but one of the deaths so far have been within its division of subway and bus operations, which employs 55,000 people.

The union that represents most of those workers, the Transport Workers Union Local 100, has said the MTA acted slowly, particularly in the issuance of masks. The union’s leader, Tony Utano, on Wednesday called on the MTA to give hazard pay to its workers.

The MTA says hazard pay should be funded by the federal government.

UNDERSTANDING CORONAVIRUS

- What We Know About the Virus
- How to Prepare for Covid-19
- Covid-19 Tests and Treatment
- Navigating Your Life
- A Guide to State Lockdowns
- Live Updates: Coronavirus and Business
- The Facts on Coronavirus (en Español)

MTA officials have said their initial protocol was guided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which advised against masks as protection from the virus. Officials have also highlighted their decision at the end of March to disregard that advice and to begin distributing masks to front-line workers before the CDC changed course in early April and recommended everyone wear face coverings in public.

MTA Chairman Patrick Foye, speaking after authority board members approved the benefits program during a virtual meeting Wednesday, said it would be up to epidemiologists and public-health officials to figure out how the virus spread through public transit systems.

Mr. Foye, who is 63 and recently recovered from what he described as a “luckily mild case” of the virus, noted that most of the MTA workers who died were male and had underlying medical conditions that made them more prone to serious health issues related to the disease.

Mr. Foye added that he regretted that the CDC and World Health Organization initially advised against masks.

The MTA began disinfecting buses and trains in early March. But it wasn't until late March that the authority started to reduce interactions between workers and the public by reducing cash transactions for fares and switching to rear-door boarding on buses.

Since then, the authority has taken further measures, such as installing plexiglass barriers at some subway work locations, bus depots and maintenance facilities. It has also launched a partnership with a health provider to test symptomatic workers.

About 3,800 MTA workers are quarantined because of the virus, down from a high of 6,000 workers, according to authority officials.

Before the virus struck New York City, about 5.4 million people rode the subway on an average weekday. Today, the service carries fewer than 500,000 weekday riders.

The MTA's chief financial officer warned Wednesday that the authority's fiscal outlook is bleak. An economic analysis commissioned by the MTA estimated the virus will cost the authority between \$7 billion and \$8.5 billion this year, mostly in lost fares, tolls and tax revenues.

The authority received almost \$4 billion in a recent coronavirus federal bailout. Last week, the authority asked the region's congressional delegation to seek a further \$3.9 billion when Congress considers its next relief package.

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