April 6, 2020

K. Jane Williams, Acting Administrator
Federal Transit Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

RE: Urgent Need for Personal Protective Equipment for Transit Workers

Dear Administrator Williams:

I am writing with an urgent request regarding the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) on America’s transit systems, especially masks. As discussed below, we are calling on the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to centralize the acquisition and distribution of essential N95 masks and other PPE required to keep our transit bus operators and other system employees alive and to protect the lives of millions of our nation’s riders.

Nationwide, hundreds of transit workers have already tested positive for Coronavirus, and several have died. Our members are getting infected at a rate that is much higher than the general population because we are continuously exposed to large crowds of transit-dependent riders at close range without the necessary PPE to keep us safe.

On April 3rd, CDC released new recommendations regarding masks, citing recent studies finding that “…a significant portion of individuals with Coronavirus lack symptoms (“asymptomatic”) and that even those who eventually develop symptoms (“pre-symptomatic”) can transmit the virus to others before showing symptoms.”

In light of this new evidence, CDC recommends wearing cloth face coverings in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain (e.g., grocery stores and pharmacies) especially in areas of significant community-based transmission. Given this new guidance, the language on FTA’s website stating that “…PPE is not recommended at this time…” is outdated.

Unfortunately, the scene depicted below, taken last week on a bus in Grand Rapids, MI, is all too common. The passengers are all bunched up in clear violation of CDC guidelines. Few have masks. The driver of the bus has no PPE. It is as if no public health crisis exists at all. How in the world can this be considered safe?
It has been obvious to us that transit workers have been risking their lives without masks. Nine of our members across the country have died from COVID-19 and hundreds are sick. Each time a passenger coughs just a few feet behind them, our bus operators’ hands grip the wheel a bit tighter, knowing they are in a potential death trap.

Every worker who operates or maintains a transit vehicle should, at a minimum, be equipped with an N95 disposable respirator to the fullest extent possible. Unfortunately, even transit systems that wish to buy PPE are currently unable to do so. The only way to address the equipment shortage and price gauging is for the federal government (FTA) to secure such PPE immediately and distribute the equipment directly to its grantees at reasonable cost.

It is unconscionable and immoral to send transit employees to work without PPE during this health crisis. Our members provide essential public services, making sure that people can get to the doctor, the pharmacy, and the grocery store. But they cannot be expected to do so while putting their lives in danger. If a transit agency does not have PPE available for the frontline workforce, it calls into question whether service should continue.

Your immediate review and action on this matter is requested.

Sincerely,

John A. Costa
International President

c: The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker, U.S. House of Representatives
    The Honorable Peter DeFazio, Chair, U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
    The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton, Chair, U.S. House Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
    The Honorable Charles Schumer, Minority Leader, U.S. Senate
    The Honorable Sherrod Brown, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
    The Honorable Robert Menendez, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development