

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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Opening Statement of Ranking Member Tammy Duckworth (IL-08)
Subcommittees on Transportation and Public Assets & Government Operations
D.C. Metro: Update
July 21, 2015

Chairman Mica, Chairman Meadows and Ranking Member Connolly, thank you for holding this evening's joint hearing to examine the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's (WMATA) efforts to implement key safety recommendations developed in the aftermath of the January 12, 2015 Metro incident that injured more than 80 passengers, and worst of all, led to the tragic death of Ms. Carol Glover.

Metro operates one of the Nation's most important transit systems. It is vital that we act decisively to restore confidence in Metro, which connects our Nation's capital and serves millions of tourists hailing from all 50 States and across the globe, in addition to tens of thousands of career civil servants. As Ranking Member Connolly noted at the February hearing, "...when Metro doesn't function, the Federal Government has to shut down."

I also hope this Committee's focus will extend beyond WMATA, as the challenges associated with the January 12 incident carry important transit safety lessons that extend far beyond the National Capital Region. For example, in my home State of Illinois, we are quite proud of the Chicago Transit Authority, which operates the second largest public transportation system in the United States and boasts an average daily ridership of 1.7 million riders. Yet just like WMATA, CTA faces the daunting task of maintaining efficient operations on a massive, aging system; all without sacrificing passenger safety.

As Ranking Member of the Transportation and Public Assets Subcommittee, I am particularly interested in examining the effectiveness of the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) efforts to improve mass transit safety. It remains unclear why FTA did not effectively implement the now-prophetic 2007 NTSB recommendation that explicitly directed FTA to:

"Inform all rail transit agencies about the circumstances of the July 11, 2006, Chicago Transit Authority subway accident and urge them to examine and improve, as necessary, their ability to communicate with passengers and perform emergency evacuations from their tunnel systems, including the ability to (1) identify the exact location of a train, (2) locate a specific call box, and (3) remove smoke from their tunnel systems."

The FTA had more than seven years to ensure that all rail transit agencies were not only informed of the 2006 electrical arcing incident that occurred in downtown Chicago, but more importantly, took action to “examine and improve” their ability to communicate with passengers, locate stopped trains and use ventilation systems to remove smoke from tunnels during arcing incidents.

The January 12 accident is a wakeup call to America’s entire rail transit system that ignoring NTSB recommendations can have deadly consequences for our constituents. We cannot, we must not, allow this to happen again.

I look forward to examining with NTSB Vice Chairman Dinh-Zarr what specific policy and oversight actions Congress can take to ensure that Federal entities, such as the FTA, fully accept – and effectively implement – NTSB safety recommendations. While it is not possible to completely eliminate risk from a transit system that is full of unforeseen and uncontrollable factors, Congress can ensure rail systems across the country learn from past mistakes.

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