

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Tammy Duckworth (IL-08)
Joint hearing of the Oversight Subcommittees on Transportation and Public Assets and
Government Operations: “Examining the Safety and Service of D.C. Metro”
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In the United States, rail transit ranks among the safest modes of transportation. However, as famed pilot “Sully” Sullenberger wisely warned the commercial aviation industry:

“It’s important not to define safety as the absence of accidents. When we’ve been through a very safe period, it is easy to think it’s because we are doing everything right. But it may be that we are doing some things right, but not everything. We can’t relax.”

Unfortunately, a series of rail accidents in our Nation’s capital reminds us that Mr. Sullenberger’s statement also applies to mass transit. Over the past seven years, 9 passengers and 7 employees have been killed on the Washington Metrorail system, and many more have been injured. Riders have lost confidence in Metro and rebuilding trust will require far more from the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) than simply reminding passengers that driving is far more dangerous than riding with them.

Of course, Congress must also hold itself accountable for creating a weak Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Compared to FTA’s U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) counterparts – the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and especially the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) – FTA lacks the authority, resources and experience necessary to make sure state safety oversight agencies effectively protect rail transit passengers and workers.

I am concerned that the entire rail transit sector may be out of step with the positive safety trends experienced by the global aviation industry, which cut the rate of crashes and fatalities in half from 2000 through 2012. Moving forward, rail transit must learn from the past experiences of other transportation industries.

According to NTSB’s 2006 accident report, “This accident offers many lessons to both CTA and to rail transit systems around the country and we have made a number of recommendations to address those issues.”

For example, NTSB recommended that FTA inform all rail transit agencies of the CTA derailment and, among other things, make sure all rail transit systems had the capability to communicate with passengers during an emergency, and the ability to remove smoke from tunnels. NTSB also found that FTA oversight of the Regional Transportation Authority was, “...inadequate and failed to prompt actions needed to correct track safety deficiencies on the Chicago Transit Authority’s rail transit system.”

Despite NTSB’s clear findings and recommendations produced in 2006, it became tragically clear on January 12, 2015, that neither FTA nor WMATA implemented reforms to Metro’s procedures, policies or training to prevent similar incidents years later. Metro could not

communicate with passengers during the emergency. Worst of all, Metro's inability to remove smoke from the tunnel had deadly consequences.

My constituents wonder why we even spend taxpayer dollars on NTSB investigations if the lessons are never learned, let alone acted on to prevent future accidents?

Moving forward, there seems to be bipartisan recognition that FTA was set up to fail, and I am pleased that MAP-21 strengthened FTA's authorities to enforce critical safety rules. However, we cannot relax. We must examine what further enhancements must be made to FTA's statutory authorities and explore key issues, such as whether FRA would be a more effective safety regulator for Metro. Clearly, there are many lessons FTA can learn from FRA and FAA, and this Committee should play an important role in helping reforms spread across agencies and all levels of government.

We must also never forget the bottom line. **At the end of the day, the millions of Americans that rely on mass transit care very little about which Federal agency is overseeing what state entity. Passengers simply want peace of mind that their local mass transit system will transport them safely to work and back home to their families. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses about how we can achieve this goal.**

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