

Fraternal Order of Transit Police

FOP Lodge #109



Testimony of Omari Bervine, Fraternal Order of Police, PA State Lodge
Fraternal Order of Transportation Police, Lodge 109, Before Pennsylvania
Senate Transportation Committee

May 9, 2022 - Public Transportation Safety and Sustainability

Committee Chair Langerholc and other Committee members,

Good day. My name is Omari Bervine. I am a 15-year veteran of the SEPTA Transit Police Department, where I hold the rank of Transit Police Officer. In addition to my police duties with SEPTA, I serve as the elected President of the Fraternal Order of Transit Police, Lodge 109, and as a member of the Legislative Committee of the Fraternal Order of Police, Pennsylvania State Lodge, which represents over 40,000 law enforcement professionals throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

I would like to extend my thanks to Committee Chair Langerholc, Minority Chair Flynn and the other Committee members for your attention to the critically important issue of safety and sustainability of Pennsylvania's public transportation systems. Because we all should know, and I can speak directly from my experience with SEPTA, if a public transportation system is not safe, it is not sustainable.

Sadly, "unsafe" and "unsustainable" are words that accurately describe SEPTA. Our Transit Police Officers are responsible for policing the entire regional SEPTA system, covering an area of five Pennsylvania counties and three states. We are sworn to protect and serve SEPTA's riders throughout the 2,200 square-mile SEPTA service area, which in 2021 logged almost 130 million passenger trips. It's a massive challenge, and SEPTA simply does not employ enough Police Officers to meet that challenge. SEPTA's Police Department is budgeted for 260 sworn officers, which already isn't enough to do the job, but as I speak here today, our Police Department operates with fewer than 160 available patrol officers. Not long ago, this number was well in excess of 200.

The result? More crime, more danger, and more people deciding that taking public transportation just isn't worth the risk. It's no secret that the riders who left SEPTA during the pandemic are not coming back, especially to our Market-Frankford and Broad Street lines.

And who can blame them? The Philadelphia Inquirer recently reported that robberies and aggravated assaults on SEPTA property jumped by more than 80% from 2019 to 2021, even as the number of riders during that period of time was



cut in half. And 2022 is looking even worse. In recent days alone there have been several incidents in which SEPTA passengers were stabbed in one of our stations. In the last 3 weeks alone, multiple passengers were pushed onto train tracks by an unknown assailant. And just few weeks ago, a woman was reportedly raped at a Broad Street Line Station, on the very same day that a gunpoint robbery occurred at 15th Street Station, and a rider was stabbed at 34th Street Station. A rape, a robbery, and a stabbing all occurring in one day on SEPTA.

Not surprisingly, this spike in crime throughout the SEPTA system has been happening as the number of Police Officers has been reduced, leaving SEPTA woefully underprepared to face the current onslaught of violent criminal activity that is threatening to overrun our city's mass transit system.

The saddest thing about the recent turn of events is that it was so preventable. We are facing the problems we have today because SEPTA has refused to invest in its Transit Police Department and its Transit Police Officers. SEPTA struggles to keep the Police Officers we have right now, and to recruit new officers, because SEPTA does not provide a competitive pay and benefits package. In the last few years, my department has lost over 100 officers through resignations, most of whom left to pursue police jobs in departments offering higher salaries, better benefits, and safer working conditions. This has to change. Because if SEPTA continues to refuse to invest in the women and men who keep their riders safe, the system will continue to bleed riders and fail.

I am asking the members of this Committee to do your best to stop this from happening. Take the steps that are needed to recruit and retain qualified Transit Police Officers so that we can restore public confidence in the system. Provide funding, but require that the new funding be invested in a compensation package that will allow SEPTA to compete with neighboring departments for talent. Enhance collective bargaining rights for Transit Police Officers by providing for interest arbitration of our contract disputes, just like every other Police Department. Close the loopholes in the Heart and Lung Act that permit SEPTA to treat injured Transit Police Officers like civilians as opposed to police officers. Close the loophole that deprives SEPTA's Police Officers of Act 17 benefits that protect police officers everywhere else in the Commonwealth from the risks of contracting COVID-19 at work, but not us. Simply put, as long as SEPTA is permitted to treat its Transit Police Officers as second-class citizens, it will continue to lose talented officers to departments that treat them fairly and with the dignity they deserve. The transportation system will grow less safe, and less sustainable. Everybody loses.

I know that nobody in this room wants this to happen. That's why SEPTA's Transit Police Officers and the FOP are grateful for this Committee's attention to the issue of safety. We need your help so that we can do our best to protect the public in these dangerous times. Because if we cannot convince the public that public transportation is safe, at SEPTA and throughout the Commonwealth, then the entire system is doomed to fail.

Thank you for your continued support for the men and women in Pennsylvania's law enforcement community. We look forward to continuing to work with the Committee on this and other issues to provide for safer transportation and safer citizens throughout our Commonwealth.



Best regards,

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President/CEO

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