



## Senate Transportation Committee Hearing: Safety and Sustainability of Public Transportation in Pennsylvania - Transit Forward Philly Testimony

Good afternoon Committee Chair Senator Langerholc, Senate Transportation Committee members, SEPTA staff, and other guests. My name is Yasha Zarrinkelk, and I am the Advocacy Director & Coalition Manager of Transit Forward Philadelphia, a coalition of over two dozen Greater Philadelphia organizations. We are made up of labor unions, businesses, community development corporations, environmental justice groups, senior, elderly, and disability rights advocates, and a collective of riders interested in advocating for a safe, accessible, and sustainable transit network that allows people, communities, and businesses to thrive. Our goal is to amplify riders' voices who have been historically underrepresented and left out of conversations regarding transit justice and transportation equity.

I am pleased to be here today, representing only a portion of the diverse group of riders, residents, and community groups throughout the transit-dependent but also transit-rich city of Philadelphia. Transit Forward Philadelphia believes that a livable, healthy, and safe Philadelphia is also a connected, transit-rich, and fully funded SEPTA network.

### SEPTA'S IMPACT

SEPTA is a lifeline for all Philadelphians. The agency connects riders to family, community, and culture. With investments in SEPTA that support safe, frequent, and reliable service for riders, the state and the agency have an opportunity to enrich the lives of all Philadelphians by providing a lifestyle transit network that connects families, seniors, and youth to jobs, school, food, healthcare and commerce. SEPTA powers our institutions, fuels our small businesses, and generates the taxes that make our region run. I cannot stress enough how much Greater Philadelphia transit riders, workers, and systems are the engines of our economy and the backbone of our communities.

In addition, investments in SEPTA and public transit agencies across the state intersect the plethora of other major issues across the region and in the city such as affordable housing, access to healthcare, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and most importantly keeping our communities safe from gun violence, physical assaults, traffic deaths, and the harmful consequences of urbanization and gentrification.

### SAFETY ABOARD THE SYSTEM

After the recent events of violence, assault, and crime that have occurred aboard SEPTA and transit agencies across the country, the safety and well-being of riders and transit workers are at the top of everyone's mind. Transit Forward Philly has found that public safety is often a major obstacle to using the system through public outreach and surveying of riders for our Better Buses campaign. Former SEPTA riders went so far as to say that safety is the primary reason they have stopped using the system. This also includes SEPTA operators who need the support of management and the state to prioritize their safety and protect workers.

## PROACTIVE STEPS & EQUITABLE SOLUTIONS

However, we are excited and pleased to see SEPTA utilizing federal infrastructure funding and employing creative, progressive, and equitable solutions to enhance riders' experience, provide reliable and dependable transit service, and try to prevent any service cuts for riders.

Transit Forward Philadelphia and SEPTA thankfully share a few goals for ways to encourage ridership to come back to the system and, in turn, make SEPTA safer for everyone. **This is a complex issue that can quickly become a slippery slope and cyclical cycle for ridership loss and lead to direct increases in crime. If riders feel unsafe aboard the system, fewer riders will utilize SEPTA services and, in turn, more opportunities for undetected and unsupervised crime.**

**The answer to this cycle of crime and ridership loss is not to pull investments from the agency but rather fund our transit agencies to encourage riders back onto the system, cultivate a safe space for riders aboard the system and at SEPTA stations and stops, as well as make SEPTA a welcoming and useful mode of transportation for riders. The region needs a robust mass transit system to support the region's recovery, and rebuilding SEPTA ridership is critical.**

It is important to note that these issues are not the sole responsibility of the transit agency; however, SEPTA does need to take proactive steps to mitigate crime and support the City's policies to reduce homelessness, drug addiction, and gun violence. Issues of violence, homelessness, and drug addiction reflect broader societal challenges. SEPTA has a responsibility to riders and the community to provide the safest and most reliable service they can.

Thankfully, encouraging signs indicate that incidents of violent crime reported on the system have gone down in the first quarter of this year, as SEPTA ridership has increased from January through March and this is due to the creative and progressive solutions the agency has taken to make riders feel safe aboard the system again.

SEPTA's SCOPE program, or the Safety, Cleaning, Ownership, Partnership and Engagement program, works closely with SEPTA Transit Police, Operations, and System Safety personnel to provide outreach services to vulnerable community members. And in a one-of-a-kind partnership with two local universities, first-year medical students and undergraduates are now serving as "health navigators" in the system.

In 2021, the Transit Police SAVE Unit and SCOPE program had nearly 5,000 engagements. It made hundreds of referrals to social service providers. In September of last year, the SEPTA board approved a \$3.6 million plan to allow the authority to deploy up to 57 new outreach workers to partner with SEPTA police in providing drug addiction and housing services. This is an excellent example of how SEPTA can ensure the public safety of riders. We at Transit Forward Philly applaud and encourage SEPTA and agency management for implementing alternative programs to address the issue of safety. By deploying a variety of additional personnel - civilian administrative staff, social workers and third-party security guards – SEPTA is putting all hands on deck to address the current challenges of vulnerable individuals seeking shelter in the SEPTA system. A holistic, service-based approach to safety on the SEPTA system is key to this issue and will significantly increase ridership aboard the system.

We have also heard that SEPTA will formally introduce SEPTA Outreach Specialists, which the Board approved in February of 2022. The Board awarded \$6.6 million in contracts to three minority-owned firms, including two Black-owned Philadelphia companies, to provide a visible presence in high volume stations and on the Broad Street and Market-Frankford Lines. This additional personnel will notify SEPTA Transit Police of safety and quality of life issues, engage riders to provide direction and referrals to Customer Service, advise riders of behavior rules, and connect the vulnerable population with SCOPE and SAVE resources. Eventually, the Outreach Specialists program will add 88 additional "eyes and ears" to Broad Street and Market-Frankford Line stations and vehicles every day and assume station opening and closing duties.

**Again, the answer to this cycle of crime and ridership loss is a legislative policy that provides strong, sustainable, and bondable investments in SEPTA and public transit agencies across the state. Encouraging riders back onto SEPTA by cultivating a safe space for riders aboard the system, riders will become the eyes and ears of the network and help protect our communities and reduce crime aboard SEPTA.**

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak to all of you about the future of SEPTA and keeping the system safe, sustainable, and reliable for riders, communities, and voters. I am happy to answer any questions from the committee, and thank you for your time.