

Request to Establish Transit Ambassadors Program on CTA

Access Living Testimony at CTA Board meeting Sept. 15, 2021

On Behalf of the Transportation Equity Network

My name is Laura Saltzman, I am the transportation policy analyst for Access Living, a disability rights organization located in Chicago. I am here on behalf of the Transportation Equity Network, a coalition of 40 community groups and organizations in Chicago and suburban Cook County working on embedding racial equity and mobility justice into transportation to speak in support of CTA establishing a transit ambassador program.

With lower ridership during COVID, there has been an increased perception of safety issues on transit and widespread news coverage of public safety incidents. The perception that transit is unsafe discourages people from using it.

There is concern that there may be permanent decreased ridership if people do not feel safe on buses and trains. However, an increase in law enforcement or other armed guard presence is no cure-all. Transit riders are disproportionately likely to have had negative interactions with law enforcement and fear an escalated response if their behavior is seen as threatening or abnormal. Regretfully, law enforcement in Chicago simply does not have a reputation or a history of de-escalating.

The recent report by TransitCenter called *Safety for All* provides insights into the potential of reimagining safety on transit: "Since simply increasing police presence can generate additional risks for many riders, transit agencies need to shift resources toward public safety programs that acknowledge that a safe system can mean different things to different people. More holistic approaches that make use of unarmed customer service and social welfare personnel should be used to reduce interactions between riders and the police while building better support for vulnerable riders."

This is why we wholeheartedly support the creation of a transit ambassador program on CTA. We want people to feel welcomed onto trains and buses, safe, not overpoliced or in fear. At Access Living we view disabilities holistically, which is why we are happy to sign onto a program that would train transit ambassadors on how to interact and help people with a range of disabilities, with a special focus on de-escalation for people with mental health issues or for those who seem to be on the verge of causing disruptions.

An ambassador program staffed by unarmed personnel explicitly trained on de-escalation measures has seen success in San Francisco on Bay Area Rapid Transit. And this spring, the Los Angeles Metro Board of Directors unanimously approved a motion funneling \$40 million toward the creation of a transit ambassador program.

The concept of such a program is consistent with where the State of Illinois is moving, a natural extension of the work that Access Living and our allies achieved with the passage of the Community Emergency Services and Supports Act, or CESSA, signed into law last month. CESSA mandates a non-law enforcement response for people in crisis throughout Illinois. So, we are asking CTA to fund and develop during its next budget cycle, a transit ambassador program with people who are trained in how to deal with disabilities and de-escalation. We need a program that welcomes all who want to ride transit in Chicago. This would be an eligible and very appropriate use of COVID Relief Funds so this program could be started immediately. The members of the Transportation Equity Network would be eager to partner with CTA to help shape this program. Thank you very much for your attention.