

Closing of Subway Booths Raises Safety Concerns

by Madeehah Shaheed

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Photo by [BKabak](#)

In the wake of judge Saliann Scarpulla's decision that the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) could not fire 260 token booth clerks and close subway station booths, the agency continues to move ahead with its plan, saying it must enact these measures to close its \$800 million budget gap.

On June 4, Scarpulla, a state Supreme Court justice, decided that the MTA had closed the 14 revenue booths and 42 station Customer Assistance booths and laid off workers illegally due to them not having public hearings prior to taking action. The ruling also called for the MTA to rehire the laid off workers and reopen the closed booths.

For the Transport Workers Union, Scarpulla's ruling is bittersweet, since the clerks remain out of work and the booths closed while the transit authority appeals.

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"The battle is long from won and unfortunately, despite several court orders favorable to our position, the MTA is successfully using delaying tactics," said Jim Gannon, spokesman for [Transport Workers Union 100](#), which represents subway workers.

The MTA insists that the layoffs are necessary. "These closures were necessitated by the MTA's dire financial situation, and the need for the savings they generate remains," the agency said in a statement.

Safety Under Ground

Critics of the move, however, contend the closings will make subway stations more dangerous places. "What the MTA is doing is bad for everyone except the swipers, muggers and terrorists. Riders understand this," said Gannon. "They hate booth closings."

The MTA declined to answer questions concerning possible safety concerns.

Ann Francis, a 68 year-old passenger who attended a recent union rally outside MTA headquarters, believes that the transportation authority board does not recognize the potential safety concerns. Calling the situation "nerve racking," she said, board members "don't represent people who ride transit."

"We do not just sell metro cards, we save lives," said Balwant Jaswal, a laid-off station agent who recalled times when she has had to call the police for passengers who have been stuck in elevators, separated from their parents or even fallen on the tracks. "If I wasn't there, nobody would be there to call the cops," she said.

"We aid in arrests. We are an extension of the NYPD," said Maurice Jenkins, a TWU vice president with the station agents division.

City Councilmember [Peter Vallone](#), who is chairman of the Public Safety Committee, concurred with the safety concerns. The police department, he said, does not have additional officers to assign to the transit system. "The police are down to 35,000 officers," he said.

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In response to such concerns, the State Senate this week [passed](#) a bill that would bar the transportation authority from laying off any more token clerks or running subway trains without conductors for three years or until completion of a report on subway safety. While the authority opposed the measure, its sponsor, Sen.

[Martin Dilan](#)

said, "I really don't want to micromanage the MTA, but sometimes public safety trumps everything."

The layoffs have had another unintended costs, according to the union. Overtime expenses have [reportedly risen](#) as the authority needs clerks to work extra hours to staff booths.

An agency spokesperson, Paul Fleuranges, told the Daily News that the agency was still coming out ahead. "While we are spending overtime to cover overnight and weekend shifts, that overtime is less than what we would have paid in regular pay plus benefits," he said.

The Next Moves

New York Public Authority Law 1205 states that no closing of a booth can take place except during renovation and/or during an emergency, unless a public hearing has been held. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority now reportedly expects to hold hearings this month.

According to the TWU, the MTA plans to hold a pro forma session and not rehire workers who have been laid off.

In its statement, the authority said it will appeal the judge's ruling as well as "proceeding on a parallel track with the public hearing process. â€¦ The MTA Board authorized the public hearing process to move this vital cost-saving initiative forward."

Vallone places much of the blame for the current situation on the state government. The state last year [took](#) about \$140 million from the MTA and transferred it to the state's general fund.

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"Albany took the money from the MTA. Stopped MTA funding," Vallone said.

Whoever they might blame, the station agents continue to fight for their jobs.

"Now I have to pay for a mortgage. It's very hard for me. I don't know what to do," said Narinder Singh, who was a station agent for two years before being laid off on May 11. He said the workers were given only 12 hours' notice, something he likened to "a human rights violation."

Jenkins, a station agent himself for the past 29 years, described the day for his fellow workers as one of the worst in his life. People came to him in tears after being called to a city school and told to turn in their equipment and given a seven-day metro card.

"I keep thinking this is all a dream," said Jaswal.