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How Train Conductors, Bus Drivers Cope with COVID-19 Threat: Cameron on Transportation

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“In my 30 years in the transit business I never thought I’d be asking people NOT to take the bus,” says Doug Holcomb, CEO of Greater Bridgeport Transit, the operator of 57 buses carrying 5 million passengers a year. But not this year.

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Like most transit agencies, GBT is asking people to stay home and to ride their buses only if it is essential. So ridership on those buses has dropped 65%. On Metro-North the ridership is down 90 to 95%.

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But what has not lessened at all is the commitment of the drivers, engineers, conductors and maintenance crews that are literally keeping things moving.

“I’m scared to death,” says one Metro-North conductor I’ll call Sally (whom I contacted thru an intermediary and who asked for anonymity). She’s not scared for herself but for what she might bring home to her family despite “bathing in Purell.”

Another veteran train conductor we’ll call Tom says it’s impossible to deal safely with the public without PPE’s (Personal Protection Equipment) like masks, which are finally being distributed to the railroad employees.

Bus drivers are also wearing face masks and keeping a safe distance from riders by having everyone board and leave by the rear door. Fare collection has also been suspended.

“Passengers have no reason to come up front (to the driver),” says Mustafa Salahuddin, president of the bus drivers union, Local 1336. “That puts drivers at ease.”

Bridgeport Transit is not only discouraging ridership, it’s trying to limit each bus to no more than 10 passengers versus the usual 30- to 35-rider capacity. That gives everyone a chance to spread out. The service schedule hasn’t been cut — yet. That’s because the few remaining riders are folks who must get to work — hospital workers, fire fighters, etc. — and the bus is their only option.

On the trains, the few remaining passengers are similar. Sally and Tom agree it’s mostly cops and immigrant laborers. “The immigrants are quiet, as always,” they say. And the railroad workers are happy to see the first responders as they know their trains are getting them to jobs keeping everyone safe.

The train riders don’t seem frightened, says Tom. “They’re just wary of each other.” Neither the bus nor train staffers say they’ve seen any passengers obviously sick, though we know patients can be contagious days before showing such symptoms.

The conductors agree that ridership is tiny, no more than six people per car (which can usually accommodate almost 100). And they’re trying to keep most cars on their train open for passengers, allowing maximum distancing.

Both GBT and Metro-North are still disinfecting their cars, wiping down every surface and even using foggers to disperse the virus-killing compounds. But conductor Tom says he still wears gloves, not just to handle tickets but for all the other parts of the train car he must touch to do his job.

Conductor Sally says most people are paying their fare using the Metro-North ticketing app, but if she doesn’t have gloves she won’t collect paper tickets.

The drivers and conductors are trying to keep their morale up, smiling and being friendly at an appropriately safe distance.

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Asked what they'd say to their old passengers, their answers were unanimous; Stay safe. We will get through this — and we can't wait to see you back on board.

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