



MTA Press Releases

[Select Language](#) | ▼

Press Release

May 10, 2020

[NYC Transit](#)

IMMEDIATE

TRANSCRIPT: New York City Transit Interim President Sarah Feinberg Appears on WABC-7's Up Close with Bill Ritter to Discuss the MTA's Ongoing Response to COVID-19

New York City Transit Interim President Sarah Feinberg appeared on WABC-7's *Up Close with Bill Ritter* to discuss the MTA's ongoing response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

A transcript of the interview appears below.

Bill Ritter: Most every other underground transportation system in the world shuts down at some point overnight for maintenance and what not. It's always been the asterisk for the New York City subway system. How do you conduct regular repairs when all trains run all the time? But now, they don't and maybe won't for a while. They're shut down so that every train, every station, every night can get disinfected. So how's that going? Is this the way to fight COVID-19? And why didn't we do this earlier? Joining us, the President of New York City Transit, Sarah Feinberg, Sarah, good to see you again.

Sarah Feinberg: Hey, great to be with you.

Ritter: First, how are you doing, how is your family doing in this pandemic.

Feinberg: Thank you so much for asking. We're great, we're doing well. Everyone's healthy thank goodness. I'm glad that you're healthy now and I feel very blessed.

Ritter: We all should be so lucky. As you know, so many people in this city, in this state, in this country who are not well. Let's talk about what you started this week and that is, every night, cleaning and sanitizing of the trains and stations in the New York City subway system. The first time you had to actually intentionally and indefinitely shut them down from 1 a.m. 5 a.m. How's it going so far?

Feinberg: Yeah, I mean obviously it's unprecedented. I don't think I ever imagined I would be overseeing the shutdown of the system overnight. I don't think anyone could have seen this coming. But the reality is we are in an unprecedented situation and the ground keeps shifting underneath our feet. And the way I describe it is, every day we wake up and we realize there's more that we need to do to keep people safe, and we will not stop trying new things, and we won't rest until we are confident we are doing absolutely everything we can to keep our workforce and the riders who depend on us safe and healthy.

Ritter: So tell me how many people are actually doing this every night, and is four hours enough time to do this for all the trains and stations we have?

Feinberg: Well so to be clear, we're cleaning 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And so over the course of that 24 hours each day, more than 2,000 people are flooding the system and cleaning and disinfecting. Those overnight hours give us an added ability to get to absolutely everything. It gives us the ability to really surge into the system, make sure that we've gotten every train car, disinfect those stations for a second time, gives us that room where we can really make sure we've gotten to everything. And of course, it means riders aren't there and while we wish that we could serve the public 24 hours a day, those hours overnight are really key to make sure that we can get to everything.

Ritter: Right, I remember when I talked to your predecessor, Andy Byford, when you first took the job. And he was a little surprised, it's a big challenge. New York, it's I think the only big city in the world that doesn't shut down at some point to do maintenance and it just, it didn't seem to work. Now of course, unfortunately, it's working because, you're down what 80% of ridership, so there are just so many fewer people that need to take the subway.

Feinberg: Exactly. We're actually down I think 90% right now in ridership, so we've got about 500,000 people using the system, each day right now, each weekday, even fewer on the weekends. So really I mean ridership has never been so low, so it doesn't make it any less painful for those of us who devote our careers to public service and to running a transportation system for the public. It's very painful to do something like this, but it's obviously the right thing to do at this moment.

Ritter: The people who are relying on transportation overnight certainly the essential workers are the people that are still working, because I don't think the doughnut shops are open, you need essential workers, people who have to go to hospitals or whatnot, you have set up buses and whatnot for them, right?

Feinberg: Yeah, so we've made a huge effort to enhance our bus service so we are running a bunch of additional express buses, we've enhanced local service. So we've really surged on bus service to make sure that people have bus options. There are some people who, you know, their bus service would require them to make more than two transfers, three, four transfers and their commute would take, you know, an hour and a half, two hours. For those individuals, for those essential workers, we're offering a vehicle for hire program. So we're basically paying for their taxi or their livery car to get them where they need to go.

Ritter: Right, and I think that's probably the fair thing, they would certainly feel the same way that that's fair to do that. You know, so much of what we're learning, if we look at it objectively, without pointing fingers or anything else, some of the stuff we've done, we could have done better. Some of the things we did were really great and so we're trying to hold down this curve and now it seems to be going down a bit, although so many people are still sick and so many people are dying. But looking back, should we have started this cleaning before we did, a month ago, two months ago?

Feinberg: Well look, hindsight is 20/20 and as I look back there's all kinds of things that I wish I had done earlier. I think everyone who's living public service in this pandemic feels the same way. You know when I first started this job one of the first things I did, I think it was my second day on the job, I announced, we're going to start disinfecting stations twice a day and frankly, it was something that we weren't even sure that we could do, but we felt like it was important. You know I have to give so much credit to the New York City Transit workforce, they have gone above and beyond. Every day we raise the bar on them and they continue to meet it. And so, frankly, a couple months ago, you told me that I had to close the system down overnight and disinfect every single train car that was in service every 24 hours I just would have said, we can't do it, that's a logistical feat that's impossible. But here we are and we're doing it.

Ritter: And in fact, I do want to talk about this but if we do start opening up, you're going to be very aware, we're all going to be aware. We don't want this virus to come roaring back. If that happens again, will you look at it differently the next time, because there may be a next time, very likely some would say.

Feinberg: Absolutely. I mean if there's any silver lining to any of this, it's that this workforce has performed in ways that I don't think anyone could have imagined. I mean they have shown up every day and done everything we've ever asked them, and more. And you know it's our obligation to do everything we can to keep them safe. But certainly you know if we end up with a second wave, if this thing comes back, God forbid, we've certainly learned a lot during this time that we'll be able to apply going forward.

Ritter: Well it's good you're shouting out your workers, they have been heroes just like the medical workers have. They have taken New Yorkers who need to get to work, and it's been a great thing. Let me ask you, when do we get back? How do we get back? Are you involved at all in those conversations? Have you talked to the governor about all this, I know he's trying to figure out when we start to come back. And when does the system get up and running again, when people are going to go back to work, obviously, and have you had more of those discussions?

Feinberg: Sure, and it's an interesting thing to try to keep both of these challenges sort of in your brain at the same time. So on the one hand, we're taking this unprecedented step of shutting the system down overnight so that we can clean absolutely everything. At the same time, we're planning for the reopening, the reimagining if you will of the transit system. You know as ridership comes back, as people are healthy, as we get to the other side of this pandemic, what does service look like, what does the system look like, how do we help riders feel safe, how do we make sure that they've got the tools that they need to feel confident in their safety? So we're trying to do both of these things at the same time.

Ritter: How do you reimagine it Sarah, because the subways in rush hour are known for being jammed together, face to face, shoulder to shoulder, back to back.

Feinberg: Yeah look, the reality is over the last couple of months you keep hearing from the medical community over and over again. You have to social distance. Six feet plus a mask, six feet plus a mask. Well anyone who's been on the New York City subway system and frankly, anyone who's been on a subway system really anywhere knows that, particularly during rush hours, but really anytime a day, six feet is almost impossible. And so we've really been pushing the medical community, please give us some guidance. You know if six feet plus a mask is impossible, what's the next best thing. They seem to be saying, you know, be vigilant about your mask usage, make sure that your face is covered, and then put as much distance as you can between you and the next person. So that's our advice right now and it's what we're considering going forward.

Ritter: It's what we're doing everywhere in New York. We have about 30 seconds, I want to ask a quick question. The only other time you were Up Close, your very first weekend, the first day you reported, you appeared on March 1. Did you ever think, two months and a week later, you'd be doing this?

Feinberg: Of course not, I mean I don't think I could have imagined any of it. And I actually have some experience working on pandemics in the government which is what's so crazy, so you know I think many of us saw that this was going to be an issue, saw that we were going to have to take some precautions, make sure that we were taking steps to keep the workforce safe, make sure we were taking steps to keep the ridership safe, but, dealing with this pandemic at this level, I don't think anyone could have predicted it.

Ritter: Well good luck, we're all rooting for you and good luck bringing this thing back on track full time, I hope it happens.

Feinberg: Thank you, great to see you.