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IMMEDIATE

TRANSCRIPT: NYC Transit Interim President Sarah Feinberg Appears on PBS NewsHour

New York City Transit Interim President Sarah Feinberg appeared on PBS NewsHour with William Brangham on Thursday, May 21, to discuss the agency's ongoing response to COVID-19 and the future of mass transit post-pandemic.

A transcript of the interview appears below.

William Brangham: For more on the central role that public transportation plays in society and some of the concerns about safeguarding workers and passengers, I'm joined now by Sarah Feinberg, she's the Interim President of New York City Transit, which oversees all the subways and buses in that big city. Sarah Feinberg, thank you very much for being here. You just heard some of those voices of transit workers all over the country and the concerns they have about going back to work in this pandemic. Can you help us, how do you guarantee that those workers will be safe so that we can reopen?

Sarah Feinberg: Thank you for having me. So look, this has been unprecedented for the city of New York, for the state of New York, but this has also been an unprecedented crisis for New York City Transit. So New York City transit is made up of 53,000 men and women who show up every day to operate buses and to operate trains and to get people safely from one place to the other. The reassurances that I can give is that we are doing everything we can possibly do to keep people as safe and healthy as we can. So we are distributing massive amounts of personal protective equipment, gloves, masks, suits, face shields and sanitizer. We are cleaning and disinfecting our stations and our trains and our rail cars sometimes two, four, six, seven times a day. We are testing new cleaning solutions, new cleaning tools, so that we make sure we're using the best products. So I can give people assurances on all those fronts. You know I can't give them assurances and promise that their federal government will step up. I can't promise them that the guidance that we'll get from the CDC will be perfect. You know at the beginning of this pandemic for weeks the CDC told us not to distribute masks, because they were only for sick people and that they wouldn't help the healthy. Well we eventually decided to go out on our own and distribute masks anyway, so I can reassure people that I will continue to do everything I can possibly do to keep them safe, and I can tell them that I hope that I'll have federal partners that will do the same.

Brangham: What about the issue of hazard pay? As you know, there's a lot of workers who feel that the work they are doing is demonstrably hazardous and they ought to be compensated for that. Is that a possibility?

Feinberg: Absolutely. I think myself and the CEO of MTA were the first ones to call for hazard pay. Amazingly, even before the unions did. I absolutely believe that the folks who are operating the system and cleaning the system deserve hazard pay, and the federal government should step up and should create a fund for it. The Governor and others have called for a heroes compensation fund, similar to after 9/11. Absolutely the Congress should act and they should act now, and they should send hazard pay to our workers.

Brangham: If the city reopens in full and people start going back to being on buses and subways at the regularity that anyone who's been in New York City knows what those are, like, how do you guarantee that people are not too crowded together on buses and subway trains, so that they then are spreading the virus themselves?

Feinberg: We're New York City, we're MTA. We're the largest transportation system in North America. Not just on the East Coast, not just in the country, in all of North America, so it's not really a question for us on whether the ridership comes back, it's when and how quickly and to what degree. People need the transit system in New York, a lot of people don't have cars. Congestion is so bad in this city that it wouldn't work if you had a car. And so the transit system is an absolute requirement that it function and function well in New York City. So riders will come back, but to your point, it's important for folks to understand that an expectation of six feet is going to be a tough one to ever meet in New York City, and in fact to ever meet in most cities, and ever to meet in most transit systems. We are talking a lot, we spend a lot of time talking about the social distance of six feet plus a mask and that is great, that is absolutely ideal as the city opens up, as the economy opens back up. Six feet is not going to be an option, really for anyone in a lot of places in the city. And so our advice is going to be set expectations, be vigilant about your mask usage and put as much distance between yourself and the person next to you as you can and give yourself a break. Look, it's important for people to realize, I know everyone wants to get where they're going, quickly, efficiently, on time. It's really important for people to understand that the most important thing is to keep themselves healthy and safe. And so if you have to wait for the next bus, if you have to wait for the next train, if the situation is crowded and you want to walk a little bit and then take the next train, that's going to be a better solution for everyone.

Brangham: All right, Sarah Feinberg of New York City Transit. Thank you very, very much.

Feinberg: Yeah, thank you.

