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IMMEDIATE

### TRANSCRIPT: NYC Transit Interim President Feinberg Appears on The Brian Lehrer Show on WNYC

NYC Transit Interim President Sarah Feinberg appeared on WNYC Radio's The Brian Lehrer Show to discuss the MTA's ongoing response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

*A transcript of the interview appears below.*

**Brian Lehrer:** Good morning everyone, and we begin today where not that many people are going anymore: the New York City subways. Governor Cuomo's new policy of closing the entire subway system overnight, which he says is to disinfect everything every day, now has two nights under its belt. Even with ridership down by an estimated 90% the implications are huge for the essential workers who have no safer way to get to and from their jobs, and the implications are huge for homeless people who had been taking refuge there. In fact, advocates for the homeless assert that kicking homeless people out is the real reason for the Governor's policy. So, how's it going? We're happy to have with us the interim head of New York City Transit, Sarah Feinberg. Sarah, really nice of you to come on with us after what I'm sure have been two long nights, welcome back to WNYC.

**Sarah Feinberg:** Great to be with you.

**Lehrer:** And with two nights of this now, what would you say you're accomplishing that will matter to people still riding the trains?

**Feinberg:** Well, I think that the number one thing we're accomplishing, which is what we set out to do, is we are getting all of those cars that are in service--all these train cars that are in service--cleaned and disinfected. So we know that we did a pretty good job the first night, a really good job. We know that we cleaned, I think we probably cleaned everything, and I think we cleaned some cars more than once. Last night, we cleaned everything and again, some cars more than once, and so that's the priority, to make sure that all of our essential workers who are using the subway system right now and all of our workforce that's in the system working is safe. And so I'm really grateful to the workforce for how they've stepped up and been able to do this, it's a massive logistical task and they're absolutely knocking it out of the park.

**Lehrer:** You just said that some of the subway cars were cleaned more than once on the same night. I saw you say that yesterday too about night one, regarding some of the subway cars being cleaned twice. What's the point of cleaning them twice if no one has ridden them yet?

**Feinberg:** So first of all, to be clear, we're cleaning 24 hours a day. So we're doing a big push overnight when we have the advantage of having no one in the system, so we're able to make a ton of progress overnight, but we're also cleaning all day during the day. If we only could clean from 1 to 5 a.m. we wouldn't be able to get everything, so we are cleaning 24/7. And the point of cleaning the cars more than once is it's more logistically difficult to make sure that you only clean the car one time, because if a train comes in and it was cleaned 12 hours ago, we're not going to not clean it right? So we're just going to make sure that we're cleaning as much as we can with the forces that we've got, which means we're probably hitting some cars more than once.

**Lehrer:** Our reporters from WNYC and Gothamist who were out covering this at the Coney Island stop Tuesday night say they saw trains pulling in, workers spraying them with cleaning solution and wiping them down, nothing new or extraordinary to their eye, and then the train leaves. Are you saying it was more than might have met their eye?

**Feinberg:** Well, first of all, they were, as far as I know, they're only in one or two stops. So there's a lot going on across the system, so certainly in some places where we are spraying and wiping, but actually we've got huge teams of people out there who are spraying and wiping and sweeping and mopping and, and wiping again and disinfecting, and the other thing that this this time period offers us the ability to do is to test a lot of new products and dispensers and tools. The other thing we're trying to perfect in this in this time period is what are the products that are most effective and easiest to use. If I can give our cleaners a backpack dispenser that sprays, that doesn't require people to spend many hours bending over, standing up, bending over, standing up, that's great, it means it's more efficient and it's easier on the workforce too. We're doing a lot of that as well, sounds like your folks may not have seen that on Tuesday night but that's also happening all over the system.

**Lehrer:** And why wouldn't this be like, testing for the virus that's so daunting in its own way, like if a person tests negative for the virus, all you know is they're negative at that moment. The next day, if they've gone into a crowd, you don't know their status again. So for the trains, let's say you have a disinfected subway car at the end of the line at Coney Island but by the time that train in rush hour gets to Avenue U or Bay Parkway or Jay St.-MetroTech, what does the rider really know?

**Feinberg:** Right, well what the rider knows is that we are cleaning the cars as well as we can, as often as we can, 24 hours a day. And so look, in order to make sure that no germ ever landed on a subway car and stayed there we'd have tens of thousands of people just constantly wiping down every poll, so I don't think we could ever get there. But look, cleaning the cars as often as possible and disinfecting them is certainly better than not doing it so we're doing it as often as we can.

**Lehrer:** And yet that still will leave a lot of uncertainty. I guess that's why I've heard some people wonder if it's worth the extreme expense and the inconvenience to the riders of shutting down the system from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. Those riders who do need to use mass transit overnight, I know you're offering alternatives, but is it worth it if the uncertainty just flips right back by six o'clock in the morning?

**Feinberg:** Look, we're in the middle of a pandemic and I think we have to do everything we can possibly do to keep people safe. I don't want this to be a permanent check down, I think nobody does, we want to get to the other side of this pandemic and then service will come back. But I think we owe it to our riders and to our workforce to do everything we can to keep the system safe. People get into this line of work, they come work at places like the MTA, because they want people to take public transportation, right? They want to offer those kinds of resources to people, they believe in the system, and that certainly goes for myself. I want people riding the system. I want a 24-hour system, but my priority is keeping people safe, and then making sure that service is perfect.

**Lehrer:** And listeners, we can take some phone calls for the head of New York City Transit, Sarah Feinberg, at 646-435-7280. If you are a rider still using the trains for transportation at any time of day, if you are a homeless person using the trains for refuge, if you are an MTA worker, or anyone else with current contact with the system you are invited to call us at 646-435-7280, Sarah Feinberg is being good enough to open herself up to public questions as they may roll in, 646-435-7280, 646-435-7280. Or you can tweet a question, I should remember to say that, you can tweet a question use at Brian Lehrer so I'll see it. About homeless people, Sarah, the stat I saw you or someone else in the news conference yesterday give was that according to the NYPD they cleared about 2,000 homeless people out of the stations and trains Tuesday night, about 250 of them received extended interactions with people and social services, and about half of those 250 accepted services and went to a shelter. So I think those numbers, you are confirming those numbers, do you have the same stats for last night in those categories?

**Feinberg:** Sorry so let me just go back to those stats for a minute. We've been trying to figure out where the 2,000 number came from. I think I heard it, I thought I heard it from the police, we were actually talking about that this morning. I think where the 2,000 number comes from is the HOPE survey, you may be familiar with this, the HOPE organization does a count of homeless people every year, and their most recent statistic was that about 2,000 individuals were using the subway system for shelter, they were basically living in the subway system. And so I think that's where that number came from that that's the total population, or that's the most recent number we have for the total population, and then on Tuesday night at the NYPD count was about 252, I think individuals had engaged with outreach workers to talk about shelter, had engaged with nurses about getting medical care, and had about a half of those had gone on to shelters or hospitals or taking us up on the offer of services. I don't have the most recent numbers from last night, I'll get them a little bit later today, but I expect tend to be similar but we just don't know yet.

**Lehrer:** So only 10% of the homeless people they encountered on night one had extended interactions, and only 5%--half of that--agreed to go to a shelter, the Mayor called that a success. One could argue that that isn't a lot of success, either for the disrupted homeless people, or for the other riders who still have about 90% of the same number of homeless people there in the morning. Is the environment really different today?

**Feinberg:** Yeah, look, I mean, I'm a transportation expert and a public policy and government expert, I'm not unfortunately, I'm not an expert on homeless outreach and on social services, which is sort of the whole point. I mean, our argument from the beginning has been we are an agency that offers transportation, the biggest transportation agency in North America. It's all we can do to pull off every day getting millions of people, in regular times, to and from work in school and home safely. So we are not social service experts. I'm told by experts that it frequently requires many, many conversations with an individual, to sort of coax them into life can be better, you deserve better than this, let's try shelter, let's try a safe haven, let's take a hotel room for the night. So I'm told that that progress in that in that world can take many, many, many conversations, I've heard the Mayor repeat this many times. So I'm going to go with what they say that that Tuesday night was a big success in terms of numbers and getting people to take us up on our offer of services and I just hope more people will do that.

**Lehrer:** Our WNYC and Gothamist reporters who were out Tuesday night at the end of the line station in Coney Island reported that the majority of the homeless people there simply left the station and were waiting outside for 5 a.m. when the station opened again, I want to play a clip of one of the people they interviewed. The woman in this clip would only give her name as Audrey, she'd been hoping to stay on the subways overnight, and while there were, as our reporters describe it, many disheveled people, tattered clothes, not mentally well enough for an interview. There were others like Audrey, who was clear and had a plan. She had her hands full with personal belongings, but she wasn't pushing a shopping cart or anything. Since the subways were closed, she had decided to try and take a bus to Queens, although she wasn't confident she'd be able to navigate that. But it was the only alternative for her, according to her after being off, kicked off, unexpectedly at Coney Island, and she said this.

**Audrey:** I go back and forth. You know, it's like, I know all the subways, you know, the cars and everything like that, I understand them pretty well. So I know which ones I stay on and which ones I stay off. I just wouldn't go to a shelter, it's not my thing, you know I'm saying? I'd rather sit outside before I go to a shelter. I guess I have to find a bus now.

**Lehrer:** She'd rather sit outside than go to a shelter. The shelters aren't a very good alternative for a number of reasons. What do you say to Audrey?

**Feinberg:** Yeah, but look, we hear that over and over again, that people just do not feel comfortable in the shelters. Some say because they've had previous experiences that were unsafe or their belongings were stolen, and many folks are saying now that they don't want to be in a shelter, not only because of that, but because COVID is running through those shelters quickly. So, look, I absolutely understand, I don't want to force people to go anywhere they don't want to go. But we have to have a city that steps up on this. The answer for these folks cannot be because you don't want to go to a shelter because the shelter system isn't safe you will live in a transportation system, you'll live in the subway system. That is not the right solution, it's not fair to these people. I mean, that should not be where you land because you've gone through a financial crisis or because you've gone through a health crisis or because you're struggling with mental illness. That's not the right alternative.

**Lehrer:** I mean, you said a minute ago that you ran a transportation system, obviously, you're in the transportation business and that's what you want to be able to do. Have the advocates for the homeless say, it would be much better to provide hotel rooms, there are so many empty hotel rooms in New York City, than just offer the shelters as alternatives. Are you as an MTA official advocating for that, advocating to the Mayor, advocating to the Governor?

**Feinberg:** Yeah, absolutely. I have had many conversations over many months with State officials, with City officials, look, I think hotels are good are a good option. Again, I'm not an expert but I feel like that's a that's a good option for someone who needs a place to go overnight. And I will tell you some of the experts in this field have some concerns about hotels, because we've got some individuals who are likely to have some additional poor consequences that might stem from being isolated in a hotel room overnight or for a couple of days. Again, I want to leave the social services and the public policy, the homeless public policy, decisions and recommendations to others. But I think that's absolutely a good option. But look, what we keep

talking about is alternatives for a group of individuals who should have the shelter system as an option and I feel like a lot of times in these conversations we all just acknowledge that the shelters aren't safe and therefore let's put people on public transportation or let's put people in hotels that are empty, or let's allow people to just stay outside. I mean, isn't the solution that we have to fix the shelter system? Isn't the solution that we have to fix the fact that we've got a large population in the city with no place to go, and they're massively, they're incredibly vulnerable, and they're struggling with mental illness? That's the problem we have to solve for not oh, that that one problem is too hard therefore let's just let people live on trains because if they're underground I don't really have to see them. If I'm not one of those people who has to use the train from midnight to 6 a.m. or whatever it's not my problem. Well, it is our problem, it's a problem for our workforce, it's a problem for the folks who depend on the system overnight, and it's also just not right--it's not the right way to treat people who are down on their luck and need a hand up.

**Lehrer:** Clearly, but do you, in your current position, and your colleagues running the MTA have the luxury at this moment of saying we run transportation systems, we have to leave social services to the social service people, as opposed to directing more of your energy to getting more safe beds for homeless people instead?

**Feinberg:** Well, I mean, look, I, I would be curious as to how we would do that. I mean, how would the MTA start directing its employees' energy to creating places for folks to sleep? I mean it's sort of like asking the hospital system in the middle of a pandemic to start running the trains.

**Lehrer:** Right but the question is about isn't about the line workers, the question is about you all in leadership as policymakers, who presumably have the Governor's and the Mayor's ear to some degree.

**Feinberg:** Look, I have said repeatedly to State officials and City officials, including my own bosses, to the Governor, to the Mayor, to others, that we have to solve the policy problem. We've got to solve the fact that we have a whole population of people who don't have a place to go and who don't want to be in the shelter system because they view it as unsafe, and so their alternative is public transportation. That is, just because that is something that has been going on for decades and decades does not mean it's right and doesn't mean it's what we should all live with and doesn't mean that it's the right solution for this population of people. No one wants to sleep on a train, it's not right, we've got to have alternatives for folks. And I will be part of any conversation, I will, I'll be on a panel, I'll pull people together, I will suggest policy, I will bring my team into any conversation, and we've participated in those conversations, and I'll do everything I can. We do not want to be the organization that is the one that says to this vulnerable population that needs help, you won't get any help from us. I mean, we have thrown millions of dollars and tremendous resources at a program that's been going on for almost a year that offers compassionate social services to people at end of line stations at night. This is a massive expansion of that, and obviously it's different because we previously weren't closing the system, but we've been doing that for almost a year. So look, the taxpayer dollars come from all kinds of places, they come from health and human services and through law enforcement and through the MTA, but you can't argue that we haven't thrown massive resources at this because we have.

**Lehrer:** My guest is Sarah Feinberg, the interim head of New York City Transit, and Charlie in Ridgewood you're on WNYC. Hello, Charlie.

**Charlie:** Hi, good morning, good morning. Thank you for doing the show, it's really good of you. So I'm an essential worker and I'm on the trains all the time and I just had a really, really simple suggestion that I was hoping you'd consider. I was just hoping that it would be possible to ask the operators to open the windows on the trains and the buses to provide extra ventilation. Seems kind of like a common-sense thing but I actually messaged the email suggestion line and the response was that when the doors open periodically let on new air and the air circulation system is on so that's enough, but given that there is a deadly virus in the air, of course I think we all want more ventilation rather than less.

**Lehrer:** Charlie, thank you. That's an interesting question Sarah, certainly the science people do say that well-ventilated spaces, leave the virus less able to, you know, sit in spots that people will breathe in or touch than well-ventilated spots. What do you think?

**Feinberg:** Yeah it's a great, thank you Charlie, it's a great suggestion. So it's something that we've been looking at as well. We have been having a conversation both on the subways front and on the buses front and we may well actually take this action on the buses side later this week. I think it's particularly given where we are in the year, it's May and didn't feel that warm yesterday but we're certainly getting there, I think it makes a lot of sense. I asked some medical, some infectious disease experts, what they thought about adding ventilation, additional ventilation through open windows or whatever on the subway system, they said that their research suggested it doesn't make a difference, but I can't imagine that it hurts, and so I've asked our safety team here at MTA to take a look at the safety implications of allowing more ventilation into the subway system. Obviously, great if we can get more ventilation, but I don't want people to be at additional risk for anything. So we're taking a look at it, it's a great suggestion.

**Lehrer:** You know we had an infectious disease specialist on the show yesterday who actually said it's not so much the surfaces in the subway, like the poles and whatever, where the virus can live. It's the proximity to other riders and the time spent near them if the train is crowded, so to me, her answer kind of begs the question of whether cleaning the surfaces on the subway is really even the issue as opposed to running more trains to make them less crowded with presumably infectious, some infectious, people.

**Feinberg:** Look if we could get some solid sort of final medical guidance from some entity on if you do A, B, C you will keep people safe without a doubt, we would absolutely do that. I'm sure the person that you had on yesterday was an expert. Others say that the virus lives on surfaces including steel poles for days and so that's one of the reasons we've taken this all of the above approach. We've got to clean, we've got to require people to wear masks, we've got to ask people to be vigilant about social distancing. Look at it may feel possible, you know, 90% of the time right now while you're on our system to, to social distance, because there's so few, because ridership is so far down but as ridership comes back, I've been very clear, it's hard to imagine that there will be really any time of day on the New York City subway system where people will be able to social distance at six feet with a mask and so the other thing we've asked the medical experts for is we've got to have some really solid guidance from them on if you cannot social distance at six feet with a mask what is the alternative? What's the next best thing? Because we will quickly, as ridership comes back, be in a position where six feet impossible. And so is it three feet and a mask? Is it be vigilant about your mask, make sure it fits snugly around your face, and just get the distance that you can? Is it try to be only be on the system for whatever amount of time? We really need that guidance, because you know, we're sort of getting through it now because ridership is so far down, but as ridership comes back we're going to need that.

**Lehrer:** Well, what can you do in those situations? I mean, I don't think I've ever been six feet from another rider on the train during rush hour. If the supermarkets for example, are limiting the number of people who are in the store at one time, so they can socially distance, that would be so hard for the subway system considering the number of people in normal times. But is there anything like that that's possible? Some kind of quota system on a train at any time?

**Feinberg:** We're certainly looking at some tools that would give people a lot of real-time information about how crowded the system is and how crowded the approaching train or the train that they're planning on taking might be. And so, I think it will be, I hope that we'll be able to give people some additional tools in addition to obviously if the train pulls your standing on the platform you see that it's crowded or you walk down to the other end of the platform and you find a car that's less crowded. But look it would be, if you're only going to let the train get to a certain capacity, once ridership comes back you're only going to get to a stop or two and then you're not going to pick anybody up, right? And then as you get further into the system, if you're not picking people up, you're going to end up with social distance issues on platforms. And look, I think any transit official in any big city will tell you that the worst nightmare--in addition to just a derailment or a catastrophic accident--is a platform getting so crowded that people fall or pushed onto the roadbed that, which is, we always have to avoid. So people are looking at crowded trains we have to remind people crowded trains are not good, neither a crowded platforms because not only can you not social distance, it's basically like standing in the middle of an active highway system, right? You cannot, you don't want to get too close to where active trains are.

**Lehrer:** Let me get one more call in for you. Gail in Queens, you're on WNYC with the head of New York City Transit, Sarah Feinberg. Hi Gail.

**Gail:** Good morning, I have a two-part question to do with Access-A-Ride. Number one, what are the current guidelines in place for Access-A-Ride safety? And secondly, what are your plans for upgrading those guidelines?

**Feinberg:** So in terms of a Access-A-Ride safety, I assume, Gail, what you're referring to is keeping the cars safe for passengers. So we're disinfecting those cars every single day, we are asking folks to wear masks, we have limited the number of people someone can bring along with them--obviously people can have their one person or personal aid with them but we are trying to avoid situations where three or four people are in are in the vehicle---and we will do more if we need to, you know we will do more if we need to and certainly if you've got suggestions I'd love to hear them. But this is a population that's extremely vulnerable. We've got folks who have health issues, so we know that they are particularly vulnerable, we want to make sure we're doing everything we can to keep them safe.

**Lehrer:** Gail, thank you very much. The shutdown plan relies on 1,000 NYPD officers to guard stations and remove homeless people, our reporters observed that the number of police officers vastly outnumbered the workers from the homeless service organizations, who you were saying before, should be the ones doing you know that human services work. Why shouldn't it be the other way around?

**Feinberg:** Oh, yeah, look, we would love to have more outreach workers, more social services workers, we've asked for all of it. You cannot safely and securely shut down a subway system that's our size without law enforcement and police and then safely restart it. So we will always need police and a law enforcement presence, well, maybe not always, but look I'll say at least in early days we absolutely need the help of the police to safely and securely shut down the system and then start it back up. But look, I mean, we desperately need more outreach workers. We need more nurses, we need more experts in the field, we need more social service workers, I'm not going to turn down anybody I need all the we need all the help we can get.

**Lehrer:** So should the HRA, Human Resources Administration, be mobilizing a deployment that matches the NYPD?

**Feinberg:** I would love that.

**Lehrer:** Last question. I gathered the main alternative for the overnight means of transit for the riders is the various bus lines, and you've increased service on those lines, but I've seen it reported that many riders were confused by that. Did you create, did you think of creating a string of buses that replace the trains per se? Like I've seen many times for weekend track work, we've all seen this, those buses actually say on them "A train shuttle" or "F train shuttle" or whatever, I assume you considered that option.

**Feinberg:** Yeah, we considered that option and we can continue to consider that option as some additional service. The issue that we run into is, so you offered a great example, there's a weekend outage that we can do some maintenance or some construction work. We end up running hundreds of buses in order to replicate the subway system for that piece, because as you can imagine, the buses as you know, the buses carry a fraction of the number of people that that a train can carry. So it is a massive effort and requires a huge amount of resources, doesn't mean we won't end up there. One of the things we said from the beginning is that we're getting a little bit better every day, we're finding ways to be more efficient and effective. We're taking a close look at the bus service we're offering right now, as you mentioned, we added more express buses, we enhanced overnight service, we enhanced our local service. Where we find that people aren't taking the bus or where we find we can pick up additional efficiencies or move people from one sort of place that they would gather to take the subway to another to another stop, where they would get off will absolutely do it. We want to make this as easy as possible for people and we want to make sure that we're prioritizing the public transportation system. If people can't take the subway we want them taking the bus, and we're going to prioritize that every time. So still looking at it and working on wherever we can help the most people at once.

**Lehrer:** Well, I don't envy your job right now. You signed on to run a bus and subway system and you wound up helping to manage a pandemic. Any last thing that you want to leave all the listeners with?

**Feinberg:** Well, I mean, like it's, I think, for public servants and for people who joined government, they don't want anything like this to happen ever but generally they want the ball right, to use a sports reference, and so it's been a massive challenge but it's an honor to be a part of trying to solve this. And so I'm just grateful to the 51,000 men and women who work at New York City Transit who have been showing up every day during this pandemic, because they're the actual heroes who have been operating the trains and driving the buses through all of this, and cleaning, so I'm grateful to them.

**Lehrer:** Sarah Feinberg, Interim head of New York City Transit, I'm grateful to you for coming on and talking through all this, thank you very much.

**Feinberg:** Good to talk to you.