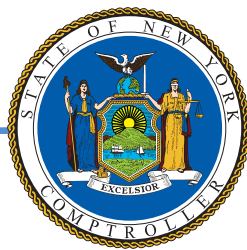

Metropolitan Transportation Authority

Homeless Outreach Programs
on MTA Properties



OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK STATE COMPTROLLER
Thomas P. DiNapoli, State Comptroller

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Background

Contracts for Homeless Outreach

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is a public benefit corporation providing transportation services in and around the New York City metropolitan area. The MTA and its constituent agencies—Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) and Metro-North Railroad (Metro-North)—provide commuter rail service throughout the region, carrying an average of 600,000 customers daily to their destination via Pennsylvania Station (Penn Station) and Grand Central Terminal (Grand Central). In addition, New York City Transit (Transit) operates the New York City subways.

The presence of homeless people on MTA properties is a growing concern for LIRR, Metro-North, and Transit customers and staff, and sometimes presents law enforcement issues. In an effort to better address the issue and to assist homeless individuals as much as possible, the MTA, LIRR, and Metro-North entered into separate contracts with not-for-profit contractors for homeless outreach services on their properties, as outlined below. To further support its efforts, the MTA also entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in September 2013 with the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS), an administrative unit of the New York City Department of Social Services, to provide homeless outreach services to reduce the number of homeless individuals sheltering on subway premises. According to the MOU, DHS agreed to enter into a contract with an outreach provider to perform the homeless outreach services on behalf of itself and the MTA. Subsequently, in June 2014, DHS contracted with the Bowery Residents' Committee (BRC) to provide homeless outreach services.

Summary of MTA Areas Served by Homeless Outreach Contracts

MTA Entity	Homeless Services Contractor	Area Served
LIRR	Services for the UnderServed (SUS)	100 stations in Nassau and Suffolk counties
Metro-North	BRC	123 stations (excluding Grand Central) in Bronx, Dutchess, New York [Manhattan], Orange, Putnam, Rockland, and Westchester counties in New York State and New Haven and Fairfield counties in Connecticut
MTA	BRC	Grand Central, Penn Station (LIRR portions), Metro-North stations and rights of way in Manhattan and the Bronx, and LIRR stations and rights of way in Queens and Kings counties
MTA (via MOU with DHS)	BRC	New York City subways

Since 2015, the MTA and its constituent agencies, as well as DHS, entered into contracts totaling almost \$35 million for homeless outreach services. Despite this significant allocation of resources, a series of audits by the Office of the State Comptroller (OSC)¹ has generally found no discernible decrease in the number of homeless sheltering on MTA properties based on reported data.

Overview of OSC Audits and Results

In January 2018, OSC initiated its series of audits to determine whether the MTA and constituent agencies have appropriate oversight and monitoring controls over homeless outreach services on MTA properties and whether they have met the goal of maintaining a safe, secure transit environment by assisting homeless individuals to appropriate shelters off MTA properties. As of June 2019, OSC has issued three audit reports; one additional report, covering subways, will be issued later this year. Overall, OSC determined that the MTA and its constituent agencies do not have sufficient oversight and monitoring controls over the homeless outreach contracts or over homeless outreach services on MTA properties.

Across all audits, for instance, OSC found the contracts with the not-for-profit contractors did not include adequate performance measures, criteria, or sufficiently explicit language to hold contractors accountable for meaningful results. Further, the standardized activity reports that contractors are required to produce—and which the MTA uses to track success and inform decision making—were based on inaccurate and/or incomplete data. Consequently, the MTA has no assurance that outreach workers are providing an adequate level of services and cannot trust that homeless clients are being served as intended and that outreach is being directed to where it is needed most.

In each of the three completed audit reports, OSC made recommendations to improve the MTA's oversight of homeless outreach services on MTA properties. In their responses, the MTA and constituent agency officials generally agreed with the recommendations, and stated that they had taken the necessary steps toward addressing those weaknesses and had implemented corrective measures to ensure improvements within the homeless outreach program. However, as valuable as these respective actions by the MTA and its constituent agencies may be, given the scope of the problem and the commonality of outreach issues, OSC believes their hoped-for outcomes can be even better served through a concerted, unified effort involving all stakeholders.

¹ Homeless Outreach Program at the Long Island Rail Road (2018-S-35); Homeless Outreach Program at the Metro-North Railroad (2018-S-36); Homeless Outreach Program at Penn Station, Grand Central, and Outlying Stations Within New York City (2018-S-5).

Oversight and Monitoring

Contract Requirements

Overall, the contracts did not establish adequate, if any, quantifiable performance measures (e.g., decrease in average number of homeless observances), criteria, and/or explicit language that would enable the MTA and its constituent agencies to hold contractors accountable for meeting expectations. Without specific guidelines, the contractors have broad latitude to interpret their actual performance.

OSC also determined that the MTA does not have sufficient oversight and monitoring controls to ensure that contractors' activities and outreach services are appropriate and contractually compliant regarding work allocation, staffing levels, and station visits, among other issues. For example, as part of a joint outreach strategy between the MTA and Amtrak, which also contracted with BRC for outreach services at its areas of operation in Penn Station, the MTA's contract with BRC for services at the LIRR areas provides for outreach workers to also "regularly" conduct joint tours with Amtrak-contracted outreach workers. Although the LIRR areas of Penn Station should be the primary focus for MTA-contract workers, OSC found outreach workers were spending a disproportionate amount of time at Amtrak areas at the expense of LIRR-level outreach.

Contractors' Inaccurate Reporting of Homeless Outreach Data

In each of the completed audits, OSC found that contractors' standardized homeless outreach reports to the MTA—which served as the basis for the MTA's data analysis and informed outreach decision making—were unreliable as they were based on inaccurate and/or incomplete data recorded by outreach workers. For example:

- For a four-month sample period, daily reports from BRC indicated a total of 11,177 homeless contacts, compared with 13,684 contacts recorded by outreach workers in the MTA's Homeless Outreach Program (HOP) database—a difference of 2,507 (18 percent).
- For two days in each of two sampled months, the SUS outreach team failed to enter homeless data in either the daily report or the HOP database or both.

Moreover, the MTA and its constituent agencies did not have an adequate process in place to verify the reported data. Without reliable data, the MTA and its constituent agencies cannot ensure that homeless individuals are being served as intended and that outreach is being directed to where it is needed most.

Observations of Outreach Activity

OSC's audits featured announced and unannounced on-site observations of outreach activity. Based in part on these observations, OSC concluded that the contractors were failing to assist homeless people to the extent possible under the contracts. In general, across all three audits completed thus far, workers were providing only limited outreach services and, in some cases, were not engaging with homeless individuals at all. For example:

- During one unannounced visit, the SUS outreach team was observed driving up to a LIRR train station parking lot and sitting in the vehicle for approximately three minutes before leaving. The team neither walked the platforms nor visited the station waiting room. However, they did record making contact with one person. Immediately after the outreach team left, auditors visited the station office, walked the platforms, and identified two apparent homeless individuals who had been overlooked for outreach assistance.
- During unannounced visits, OSC witnessed multiple scenarios in which BRC outreach workers appeared to intentionally close the outreach office off to individuals seeking assistance, depriving them of services. In several instances, apparent homeless persons repeatedly knocked on the office door, but received no response despite the availability of staff inside the office.

Key Recommendations

In each of these audit reports, OSC made several recommendations for the MTA and the constituent agency to improve oversight and monitoring controls over homeless outreach services, including the need to:

- Develop and establish quantifiable performance measures for the contracts;
- Develop and establish internal controls to ensure the reported homeless outreach data is complete and accurate, and use the data to make informed decisions; and
- Monitor outreach workers' performance to ensure they are providing a sufficient level of services.

In their responses, the MTA and constituent agency officials generally agreed with the recommendations, and stated that they had taken the necessary steps toward addressing those weaknesses and had implemented corrective measures to ensure improvements within the homeless outreach program. While OSC fully supports each agency's corrective actions within their respective areas, given the consistency of findings across these audits, OSC believes in—and encourages the MTA to pursue—a unified problem-solving approach.

Opportunities for Improvement

Weaknesses in the MTA's approach to homeless outreach contracts significantly impede its goal of maintaining a safe and secure transit environment and assisting homeless individuals. Not only do the contracts not provide sufficient structure for outreach contractors' performance, but the disparities among them hamper the MTA's ability to monitor activities. To improve homeless outreach system-wide, the MTA and its constituent agencies should establish a coordinated, organized approach, including collaboration with Amtrak. A unified effort, including regular meetings to consolidate objectives, coordinate planning, and establish best practices for monitoring and oversight, can facilitate more effective and efficient coverage of services and thereby increase goal success.

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