

# U.S. Transit Systems & COVID-19: How Does the MBTA Compare?

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Transit agencies and their advocates have had to [work quickly](#) to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with [plummeting ridership](#), many have resorted to strict [safety standards](#), [service cutbacks](#), and [laborious cleaning procedures](#) to minimize the spread of the virus while keeping bus, rail, and ferry trips viable for essential workers. In Massachusetts, where the healthcare industry has [an outsized influence](#) on the economy but transit suffers from an enormous [maintenance backlog](#), keeping service both reliable and safe must be a top priority. In gauging the MBTA's performance on these metrics, the actions of other transit agencies around the country serve as a reasonable standard of comparison (see Table 1).

## Public relations and transparency

The MBTA posts [regular updates](#) on its COVID-19 response online, and in some respects has gone much further. The MBTA's Fiscal and Management Control Board has started [live-streaming its board meetings online](#), including actively soliciting public comments. A next step towards increasing transparency for board meetings would be to release presentation materials online in advance, as is [common practice](#) for San Francisco's BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) Board of Governors. BART has also committed to distributing [multilingual informative posters](#) on COVID-19 remediation efforts and making frequent announcements in vehicles and at station message boards to help spread information. The MBTA also has such announcements, but it could do more to reach non-native English speakers in both written and aural messages.

Meanwhile, Washington D.C.'s Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) has made detailed information on [COVID-19 infections among its staff](#) available online, helping bolster public knowledge of who has been exposed to the virus. WMATA has also published [special COVID-19 system maps](#) with information on station closings and alternative rail systems. Philadelphia's SEPTA even provides a [map of essential services](#) adjacent to stations, helping guide individual decisions on whether to use its services.

The MBTA has largely failed to take some of these more advanced steps, but unions, [particularly the Carmen's Union](#), have helped fill in the gaps by keeping transit employees engaged and informed on COVID-19. From around the country, stories abound of transit agencies [working with unions](#) to stock up on protective gear and cleaning supplies.

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Table 1: COVID-19 response comparison between the MBTA and other U.S. transit agencies

Action	MBTA*	Agencies that did this**
Increased inventory of cleaning supplies	Yes	MTA, WMATA
Gave regular updates on agency protocol to staff	Unclear	BART, WMATA
Committed to cleaning vehicles multiple times per day	No	CTA, MTA, SEPTA, WMATA
Distributed posters at stations and staff-only areas to educate people on preventing the spread of COVID-19	Yes	BART, CTA, WMATA
Barred passengers from the front of buses and trains	Yes	CTA, MTA, SEPTA, WMATA
Changed fare payment policies to protect staff	Unclear	CTA, MTA, SEPTA, WMATA
Restricted boardings to enforce social distancing	Unclear	CTA, SEPTA, WMATA
Discontinued non-essential customer service and maintenance operations	Unclear	MTA, WMATA
Closed stations and entrances adjacent to non-essential uses	Unclear	BART, SEPTA, WMATA
Supplied staff with personal protective gear (gloves, hand sanitizer, masks, etc.)	Unclear	BART, CTA, MTA, WMATA
Required passengers and staff members to wear masks and/or gloves	Unclear	BART, MTA, SEPTA, WMATA
Published info about infected staff members online	No	WMATA
Displayed online and in-station listings of transit alternatives and service reductions	Yes	BART, SEPTA, WMATA
Hosted public virtual meetings among the agency upper-level management team	Yes	BART, WMATA
Actively solicited public comments on COVID-19 protocols	Yes	BART, WMATA
Coordinated education/testing efforts with the CDC, state DPH, and other agencies	Unclear	WMATA
Installed hand sanitizer and/or antibacterial wipe dispensers at each station	Yes	BART
Made frequent announcements on vehicles and station message boards on COVID-19 protocol	Yes	BART, CTA, MTA, WMATA
Formed an internal task force to work solely on COVID-19 matters	Unclear	BART, WMATA
Established an official emergency plan or hazard work policy	Unclear	BART, WMATA

\* Some answers pending a response to Pioneer's request for more information from the MBTA, dated April 15.

\*\* As of April 21.

## Reduced service

While some transit agencies have not gone as far as closing stations, many have [closed select entrances](#) to more efficiently manage reduced ridership. Benefits of this approach include the ability to divert staff from fare collection oversight and security to operations and cleaning, as well as concentrating hand sanitizer dispensers, informative posters, and other COVID-19-related items where they're most needed. The MBTA has mostly reduced service by altering its frequency, not its geographical scope. However, many bus lines are operating on [Saturday schedules](#), all ferries have been temporarily suspended, and hand sanitizers and wipes [have been distributed](#) to subway stations. The MBTA must handle service cutbacks cautiously, however, as there's some evidence that reduced service on New York's MTA in the early days of the pandemic led to overcrowded trains that helped spread the virus faster.

## Worker safety

The T has taken the ([rather common](#)) step of [restricting access](#) to the front of buses in order to protect drivers. Exceptions exist for seniors and people with disabilities, although the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) has gone further by [eschewing fare collection](#) procedures to facilitate rear-door boarding. This is particularly relevant for the MBTA Commuter Rail, which still collects fares aboard the train with [conductor walk-throughs](#).

Other worker safety procedures include efforts to enhance communication between agency leadership and staff. WMATA has committed to providing its workers with regular briefings on its COVID-19 response efforts. It's also [given them the authority](#) to limit boardings when a train, bus, or trolley is too crowded to allow for social distancing. Other agencies have gone so far as to [cap the number of riders](#) allowed in a bus at a time at 20. MBTA workers would benefit from clearer guidance on how to enforce social distancing on trains and buses, as well as freely provided masks and other protective gear.

Such measures are especially important at a time when transit agencies in [New York, Philadelphia](#), and other places have been accused of failing to properly protect their staff. Washington D.C. has also [banned](#) most business travel among its transit workers and set up an enhanced absenteeism monitoring system to “quickly detect any significant change in employee illness patterns”.

Meanwhile, BART has [prioritized](#) cleaning some staff-only areas above all others. New York's Metropolitan Transit Authority has [closed](#) many in-person customer service facilities, and Philadelphia's Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) has [stopped accepting cash payments](#) at manned kiosks to limit the volume of potentially contaminated currency that changes hands. Sick leave policies have [become more generous](#) in order to discourage contagious workers from spreading COVID-19 at work. Transit workers remain anxious, however, as evidenced by [one Philadelphia bus driver's effort](#) to remove a passenger from the vehicle for riding without a mask. Some employees have [lobbied for “hazard pay”](#) as a way to compensate for the increased danger of operating transit during the pandemic.

## Disinfection

Several agencies are cleaning high-contact areas at stations with extreme frequency—for BART, [eight times a day](#). For the MBTA, it's [six](#). Chicago's CTA has gone further by [reconfiguring station waiting areas](#) and gathering places to facilitate social distancing. Many agencies, [including the MBTA](#), have added hand sanitizer dispensers in particularly busy stations.

The vehicles themselves have also been subject to redoubled disinfection activities. SEPTA claims to [clean each vehicle twice a day](#), regardless of whether all of its passengers wear masks. Chicago's CTA has also [committed](#) to multiple bus and train cleanings a day, while the MBTA makes at least [a daily commitment](#). Palm Beach, Florida's Transportation Planning Agency (TPA) has implemented a more flexible policy, [vowing](#) to disinfect buses each time an operator ends a route. SEPTA has even [limited its bus fleet](#) to those with easy-to-clean seat materials, like plastic (as opposed to cloth). Some international transit agencies have provided free masks and hand sanitizer for each bus rider ([Seoul](#)) or required passengers to wash their hands before boarding ([Kigali, Rwanda](#)).

Several agencies have significantly [increased their inventory](#) of cleaning materials, sometimes even promising the use of “hospital-grade” disinfectant. BART has [equipped](#) all train operators with cleaning materials so they can clean their work area between rides, and offered riders [personal hand straps](#) that can be removed and washed between uses, limiting the need to touch metal bars and other shared equipment.

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## Administration

Ideally, the MBTA would have an emergency plan in place to make preparatory measures clearer and more efficient in the event of another public health crisis, terrorist threat, or severe weather. Washington’s WMATA already has an official [Pandemic Flu Plan](#), currently operating at Phase 3, as described in [a 2009 initiative](#) to better respond to outbreaks similar to that year’s [swine flu pandemic](#). WMATA has also [established](#) “direct lines of communications” with the CDC, local officials, and other transit systems.

While few transit agencies are as well prepared as WMATA, BART has appointed an [internal task force](#) to facilitate both communications among government officials and testing for employees. Lacking an 11-year-old pandemic flu plan, BART has still set up an [emergency response plan](#) in anticipation of the escalating emergency caused by COVID-19. The MBTA has nothing of the kind and, given that Boston has [more frequent severe weather](#) than San Francisco, should think more comprehensively about emergency responses going forward.

## Transit alternatives

The MBTA doesn’t have direct control over the actions of other transit agencies, but its riders often rely on connections to other services to complete their trips. At a time when using bike-share or dial-a-ride services is safer than taking the train, the MBTA should do more to make passengers aware of transit alternatives.

One of the most promising of these alternatives is bikeshare, and Bluebikes currently has [free 30-day memberships](#) for hospital workers. They’ve taken similar actions as other transit agencies, cleaning the bikes after each trip and providing regular COVID-19 updates. Some advocates have called for banning cars from city streets to facilitate social distancing on otherwise crowded sidewalks, a measure that Boston [has already adopted](#).

Efforts to improve transit connectivity during the COVID-19 crisis also involve expediting capital improvement projects. In early April, BART [announced](#) they were “taking advantage of low ridership to do extra track work”. The MBTA [is moving full-steam ahead](#) with work on the Green Line Extension, South Coast Rail, and some other projects, while [halting others](#). State projects are not subject to [local construction](#) bans, so public works efforts continue on several state highways, transit corridors, and safety installations.

The bottom line is that transit workers and riders must remain safe and healthy as they continue providing their vital services. Hospitalizations from COVID-19 [are expected to ramp up](#) towards the end of April in Massachusetts, and Pioneer Institute will continue to follow measures taken by the MBTA leadership and make recommendations to enhance employee protections and cleanliness measures. While the [Google Doodle](#) on April 14 is a welcome gesture, the gratitude that Massachusetts residents owe to transit workers should also be reflected in a robust policy response.

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