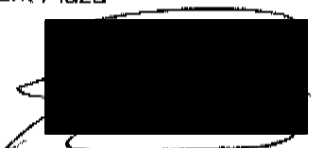


fax

Subject: Victim Statement for NTSB Transcript: WMATA Smoke Incident at L'Enfant Plaza
Date: September 7, 2015
Recipient: Robert "Joe" Gordon
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Fax number: [REDACTED]

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No. of pages: 4 pages follow



Comments:

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On the morning of January 12, 2015, I traveled from the Springfield, VA metro stop to L'Enfant Plaza where I was scheduled to teach a class all week. I boarded a train in Springfield @ 7:05 am and arrived at L'Enfant Plaza @ 7:50 am. At @ 3:10 pm, I re-entered the L'Enfant Plaza station for my return trip. I swiped my registered SmarTrip card each way. For my trip home, I was hoping to catch the Yellow Line "Rush Plus" train, which travels all the way back to Springfield. However, when I did not see on the train arrival board that a Yellow "Rush Plus" train was due to arrive soon, I decided to catch the regular Yellow Line train when it arrived. My plan was to travel one stop to the Pentagon, exit that train, and catch a Blue Line from there--an option that I had taken many times before. Unfortunately, the Yellow Line train that I boarded at L'Enfant Plaza that day was the ill-fated train that on which one woman lost her life and dozens of other riders, including me, suffered physical and psychological injury.

I boarded the six-car Yellow Line train. I never count the cars as a train reaches the platform, so I am not certain which car I boarded. But based on how close I was to the back of the train when I was evacuated, I believe I must have boarded the fourth car. I sat very near the door. I sat on the first row beside the handicapped seats that were across from the door where I had entered the car. A student who had attended my class sat very near me in one of the seats reserved for handicapped passengers. An evacuation poster was on the wall beside me. I remember looking desperately to it for guidance when it became apparent that our situation was serious, but it offered no assistance for the problem we were experiencing. While it noted instructions for exiting a metrorail train during an emergency--even while inside the tunnel--we were told repeatedly not to open the doors because the train could not move back to the platform if the doors were open.

The train pulled away from the platform, and all seemed normal. But a couple hundred yards inside the tunnel, the train stopped. Still, this is not unusual. Ordinarily, when the train stops, the train operator will announce the reason why, such as there is a train servicing the platform ahead of us, and we will be moving momentarily. But on January 12, no announcement was made for a very long time. After a while, passengers, including me, started asking each other, "I wonder what's going on?" Smoke started entering the car. A passenger very near me asked, "Is that smoke?" Several people responded "Yes!" almost in unison. Then there was a flurry of activity and a barrage of other questions--mostly, "Is the train on fire?"

At this point, there still had not been an announcement from the train operator as to exactly what was happening. There was a lot of discussion about what we would do if it was a fire. As the smoke continued to seep into the car, some people around me began to cough. I took a picture on my phone. Finally an announcement came (presumably from the train operator) but with no real details about what was happening. We were not told much more than there was a problem, and we were going to try to move back to the platform. He said nothing about whether or not there was a fire anywhere. A few minutes after that, the train did move backward a few feet but then stopped again abruptly. The announcer then informed us that there was another train on the platform, and he needed to get it moved so that we could move back. He told us also not to panic and not to open the doors because the train couldn't move if the doors were open.

Shortly thereafter, someone (again, I believe it was the train operator), walked hurriedly by without saying a word. A few minutes later, there was another announcement. He said again that he was trying to get the other train moved away from the platform so that we could move back. He then seemed to be talking to someone connected to metro and could be heard directing them to tell someone in the station to get the other train off the platform because he needed to move our train back to it.

By this time, more and more smoke was filling the car and people were really beginning to panic and show serious signs of what appeared to be respiratory distress: people were coughing seemingly uncontrollably; some were lying on the floor trying to get down as low as possible under the smoke; one man was lying on the floor near the door complaining that he had asthma and couldn't breathe; and a young man sitting on the floor right beside my seat became hysterical, and several passengers seated nearby tried to calm him. He was upsetting me. I can remember thinking how much he was acting more like a spoiled child than a frightened adult. Even in that situation, his conduct was extreme. In fact, one man who was lying on the floor already even threatened to kick his legs out from under him if he didn't sit down on the floor like people were telling him.

Many of us covered our mouths and noses with our hands, our arms across the face, clothing, scarves, tissue--anything we could use that might keep us from inhaling the smoke. Some had handkerchiefs or bandannas that they poured water on and then held them over their nose and mouth. I searched frantically through my bag for the surgical masks that I always carry with me when I travel or teach because I have a very serious allergy to bananas--even to their smell. When I couldn't find them, I started to panic. After a while, I remembered that I had forgotten to transfer the masks when I had switched out bags over the weekend. Thankfully, I had on a mock turtleneck shirt that day, and I thought to pull the collar up over my mouth and nose. I hadn't worn that shirt in three years and had made a last minute decision to wear it that day only because it matched the pinstripes in my suit perfectly. Talk about Divine intervention! With that problem solved, I was able to calm down a little and then tried to figure out what I could do to save myself. Even at that point, it didn't seem as if help, direction, or information, was going to come from anyone at metro.

At 3:38, I dialed 911, but I couldn't get a connection. I stared at the evacuation poster searching for an answer, but it offered none for our situation. Several of the men around me started talking about us needing to come up with our own evacuation plan because it didn't seem like anyone was going to rescue us. They asked questions like, "What are we going to do? Are we just going to sit here and die?" The discussion turned to whether or not we should just pry the doors open, get off the train, and try to find our own way back to the platform. I spoke up and said I didn't think that was a good idea because no one really knew enough about that electrified third rail. I said that the smoke seemed to be coming from the tunnel, so it had to be worse out there than it was on the train. Finally I said that I felt our chances were better if we stayed on the train. The discussion continued for a while and the men examined the door to see how to pry it open, but no one attempted it right then.

At some point after that, the train operator rushed past us again headed back toward the front of the train. Another announcement came telling us not to panic and not to open the doors because

the train couldn't move if the doors were open. But as more and more time elapsed and conditions worsened, we became more desperate and more convinced that we were not going to survive. I tried to remain calm. I am not prone to hysteria; my normal disposition is one of calm and reserve. But on that day, despite my outward calm, I was horrified. Never had I been in a situation where I was aware that I might actually die. But I tried to stay calm and think of something, anything, I could do. I couldn't call out for help, and there wasn't any guidance or information coming from anyone on the inside except to tell us not to panic not to open the doors. I kept listening for an answer that never came. Then the train operator came rushing through the car again headed for the back of the train a second time, but he said nothing!

Finally, a group of men in my car took matters into their own hands--they forced the door open. Then a group of four or five people, including the hysterical boy, stood there contemplating exactly what they should do when they got into the tunnel. Smoke came billowing in. I yelled out to the group to just go if they were going to leave, and close the door! These were the same people reported in the news as having self-evacuated. They exited the train, but not before making our bad situation worse. The smoke became even more unbearable. People were coughing badly. Some started crying. The air quality was so bad that we had to evacuate our car and move to the next car behind us. So now, not only were we not able to breathe, but we were packed tightly together.

There was more panic. One woman complained that she felt like she was going to pass out. She kept saying she was really hot. A woman sitting beside her was fanning her and then helped her remove her shirt. A small group, including me, joined hands and prayed. Still, there was no communication.

At some point, a fire fighter appeared in that car. But still, there was no communication or direction. I tugged at his arm and asked if we should follow him. I asked if he was there to evacuate us, but he didn't respond. Suddenly, we heard a voice yelling, "Coming through! Coming through! Sick person!" Everyone cleared the aisle. A group of people came through carrying a man by his feet and shoulders. His body was convulsing. They took him through to the next car. That was as far as I could see. A minute or two later, a similar call rang out, and another group of people brought someone else through the same way—shoulders and feet. When they passed by me, I couldn't see the person's face, but I could tell that it was a woman's body. I wondered later if that was the woman who died. Then a couple of people came by escorting the woman who had taken off her shirt. They had put a jacket around her shoulders to cover her. I just sat and watched in horror not knowing what would be my fate.

A short while later, firefighters appeared and began telling us to form a single line. Finally we were being rescued! One by one, we had to be helped down off the train. It was quite a jump down especially for me; I was wearing a 10 pound backpack that contained my books for the class I had taught. Then came the long walk, without any assistance at all, back to the station. The tunnel was barely lit, and the smoke was thick. When I arrived at the station, I asked a metro employee where we were supposed to go from there. I was told that there would be a shuttle bus outside waiting to take us to another station so that we could make our connections home. There wasn't.

Neither was there anyone to provide information once I exited the station. One person pointed to a bus at the corner. I walked down there, but that wasn't the shuttle bus. It was raining and there were no shuttle buses, no shelter to stand under, and no information. When a man approached who appeared to be a metro official, I asked him about the shuttle bus, and his response was that he had just arrived and he didn't know anything. When another bus arrived and was just sitting, I climbed on to get out of the rain. But then I was told that the bus was being used for triage only, so I had to get off unless I wanted to get medical treatment; it was going to transport people to the hospital. I declined medical treatment because, by that time, I had lost confidence in the D.C. system. I could think only about getting home as quickly as possible.

I ended up having to walk about six or seven blocks in the rain to get to a shuttle bus. Then we were grouped according to our destination. And I waited and waited in the rain. When the bus was about five blocks from the metro station where we were told we would be taken, the driver announced that everyone for that station would have to get off there. So I had to walk the rest of the way in the rain. I didn't have an umbrella--only a hood on my lightweight coat.

A kind woman on the train ride home gave me some wet wipes to clean my hands; they were covered with soot. She also gave me a couple of throat lozenges. My throat was feeling sore and I was coughing. More than four hours after leaving work, I arrived home. I blew my nose, and the tissue was full of soot. I was startled because I had covered my nose covered the whole time I was on the train. When I removed my shirt and looked at it, I discovered that the collar was saturated inside and out with soot. At best, the collar had only served as a slight filter; it did not keep me from inhaling the soot entirely. I never washed it. I still have it stored in a bag.

I sent an e-mail to my own doctor describing my experience and my symptoms and seeking medical advice. Another instructor had to teach my class the next day. I was not physically or emotionally able to go to work the next day. That was only the second time in the six years that I've been teaching for the Graduate School USA that I've had to miss a class. And missing a class means not getting paid.

But I lost a lot more than money that day; I lost peace of mind. Here it is nearly eight months later and none of the details of that harrowing experience have faded from my memory. Every time I talk about that day or see some news broadcast about it, emotionally, I find myself right back there again. The fear and anxiety I felt that day come flooding back. Even writing this statement has taken me three days because I had to take frequent breaks from it when the memories became too overwhelming. It is for this reason, as well as hearing mischaracterizations of events and acts of gross negligence that were revealed in the WMATA testimony, that I was not to be able to attend the second day of the June hearings. But if this statement of my account of events is at all useful in helping bring about safety changes in the WMATA system, it would have been well worth my discomfort writing it.

Respectfully submitted,

Iris Y. S. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

9/7/15