

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

FIRE ABOARD SEPTA TRAIN NEAR THE *

CRUM LYNNE STATION IN RIDLEY PARK, * Accident No.: RRD25FR006

PENNSYLVANIA ON FEBRUARY 6, 2025 *

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Interview of: KENNETH PALAN, Dispatcher-in-Charge
MIGUEL VASQUEZ, Dispatcher Trainee
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Tuesday,
July 29, 2025

APPEARANCES:

MICHAEL BACHMEIER, Investigator-in-Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

TODD KRAHOLIK, Railroad Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

RICHARD SHERRY, Investigator-in-Charge
Federal Railroad Administration

DAVE GRAUBARD, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration

SHANDEL WILLIAMS, Assistant Safety Operations Officer
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

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I N T E R V I E W

(3:06 p.m.)

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2
3 MR. BACHMEIER: Good afternoon, my name is Mike Bachmeier and
4 I'm the NTSB IIC for this accident. We are here today on July
5 29th at 3:06 in the SEPTA headquarters to conduct an interview
6 with Ken Palan and Miguel Vasquez, who work for SEPTA. The
7 interview is in conjunction with NTSB's investigation of the
8 accident near Paoli Station. NTSB accident reference number is
9 RRD25FR006. Purpose of the investigation is to increase safety,
10 not to assign fault, blame, or liability.

11 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around
12 the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name,
13 who you are representing, and your title. I would like to remind
14 everyone to speak clearly so we can get an accurate recording.
15 I'll start off and then pass it off to my right.

16 Again, my name is Mike Bachmeier, spelling of my last name is
17 B-a-c-h-m-e-i-e-r, and I am the NTSB IIC for this accident.

18 MR. PALAN: My name is Kenneth Palan, last name is P-a-l-a-n,
19 Dispatcher-in-Charge.

20 MR. VASQUEZ: My name is Miguel Vasquez, V-a-s-q-u-e-z, and I
21 am a dispatcher in training.

22 MR. BACHMEIER: Shandel?

23 MS. WILLIAMS: I'm sorry. Shandel (ph.) Williams,
24 W-i-l-l-i-a-m-s, Assistant Safety Officer, Operations.

25 MR. GRAUBARD: Dave Graubard, G-r-a-u-b-a-r-d, Operating

1 Practices Inspector with FRA.

2 MR. SHERRY: Richard Sherry, S-h-e-r-r-y, MP&E inspector, IIC
3 of this accident.

4 MR. KRAHOLIK: Todd Kraholik, K-r-a-h-o-l-i-k, I'm with the
5 NTSB, I'm track.

6 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay, thank you.

7 Miguel and Ken, do we have your permission to record our
8 discussion with you today?

9 MR. PALAN: Ken says yes.

10 MR. VASQUEZ: Miguel says yes.

11 MR. BACHMEIER: Do you understand the transcripts will be
12 part of the public docket, as such we cannot guarantee any
13 confidentiality?

14 MR. PALAN: Ken says yes.

15 MR. VASQUEZ: Miguel says yes.

16 MR. BACHMEIER: As discussed, you could have had a
17 representative with you today and you are representing yourself,
18 is that correct?

19 MR. PALAN: Ken says yes.

20 MR. VASQUEZ: Miguel says yes.

21 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. I'd like to ask everyone to clearly
22 announce your title -- name and title before questioning.

23 INTERVIEW OF KENNETH PALAN AND MIGUEL VASQUEZ

24 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

25 Q. Let's proceed and give your -- please give a -- Ken, could

1 you please give us a synopsis of your work experience taking us up
2 to your present job and how long you've been in your current
3 position.

4 A. Is that just currently within SEPTA or --

5 Q. Yeah. Railroad.

6 A. Okay.

7 Q. Any railroad, yeah.

8 A. This is Ken talking. I started in 1988 as a welder in the
9 B&B department where, over the years I became a PC-qualified
10 flagman. In nineteen -- or 2014, I was given the opportunity to
11 join the dispatcher training course where I successfully passed
12 and have been a dispatcher until present.

13 Q. Miguel?

14 A. This is Miguel talking. I started with the company in 2018,
15 I started off as a CCT dispatcher, five years later or about four
16 and a half years later I transitioned over to the bus side as a
17 transportation manager for the districts and then I started in
18 November of last year in the regional rail training program,
19 dispatcher training program, in which I'm currently still enrolled
20 in.

21 Q. Okay, perfect. Okay. Can we go back to the afternoon of
22 July 22nd, when we had this, 3553 was out there rolling and can
23 you remember them reporting slow acceleration? And Miguel, if you
24 want to answer, since you were acting as a dispatcher that day, do
25 you remember a conversation?

1 A. Yeah, I can't remember the train number exactly, you said 35
2 -- this is Miguel talking, by the way. Was it 35?

3 Q. Fifty-three.

4 A. Thirty-five fifty-three. They called me, I want to say
5 somewhere around Jenkin, if I'm not mistaken, they reported slow
6 acceleration on their lead MU and I repeated, I was like, you
7 know, can you say it again and they reported, you know, it's just
8 slow acceleration so I was like all right, I'll go ahead and I'll
9 turn it in to the -- I'll turn that in, I'll put it in the chat.

10 If I'm not mistaken, I believe I called out to the back and
11 it was like the train number reported slow acceleration and
12 they're like well, somebody said a lot of our trains report slow
13 acceleration, we just keep them moving, and I just went right back
14 into what I -- the dispatching I was doing.

15 Q. Okay. And when you were in the program, did you get -- did
16 you have to sign off that you -- about this new EOP that was in
17 place about how to report a mechanical or smoke or fire defect?

18 A. The one that we got was a few days ago, the other one was in
19 the emergency of -- we have a purple folder that has emergency
20 procedures when something goes wrong, but any mechanical defects
21 we put in the chat and we notify the STO.

22 Q. Okay. And did you notify the STO after this incident?

23 A. I called out to the back and let them know that they reported
24 that right after I put it in the chat.

25 Q. And that was verbal?

1 A. Verbal, yes.

2 MR. BACHMEIER: Yes, okay. I think that's all I got.
3 Shandel?

4 BY MS. WILLIAMS:

5 Q. Shandel Williams. Miguel, who was STO that night?

6 A. I believe, was it -- Dillon was there and I think Kay (ph.),
7 if I'm not mistaken. I can't remember exactly if there was two or
8 one. I know Dillon was there for sure.

9 Q. So two meaning Dillon was STO and then there was a chief
10 dispatcher?

11 A. May have been, I can't recall. I don't know exactly who
12 works what shifts.

13 Q. Okay. And when you called out to the back, do you know who
14 said -- or you said you heard a lot of trains report slow
15 acceleration, keep it moving, do you --

16 A. I don't know if that was --

17 Q. -- know who said that?

18 A. I don't know if it was a dispatcher or one of the STOs that
19 said that, I was -- it was kind of busy with all the trains
20 moving, so I didn't really -- I just know I heard a response, so I
21 took that response as if it may have been the STO, all I heard was
22 we get a lot of trains that report that, so we -- and we keep them
23 going, so I just left it as that.

24 Q. And is it normal procedure for if a train reports an issue to
25 put it in the chat as well as verbally say it to the STO?

1 A. Yes, to my knowledge, yes.

2 Q. Is there any other way that you would convey that information
3 to the STO, say like if they weren't there, is it, you know -- do
4 you -- how else would you tell them?

5 A. If they weren't there?

6 Q. Let me clarify. Is there any other way besides verbally that
7 you would tell the STO that there was an issue?

8 A. We'll put it in the chat.

9 MS. WILLIAMS: Okay. That's all I have.

10 BY MR. GRAUBARD:

11 Q. Dave Graubard with FRA. You said you told the back about it,
12 is that -- what does that look like? I'm not familiar with the
13 operation or anything.

14 A. So a row of desks in like a half circle, two desks, two
15 computers per desk --

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. -- and behind that you have another set of two desks where
18 the STO and the chief sits.

19 Q. Okay. So you always got to holler over your shoulder?

20 A. Yeah.

21 Q. Okay. So there's no eye-to-eye contact or any kind of,
22 like --

23 A. I mean, you can turn around.

24 Q. Oh, okay.

25 A. (Indiscernible).

1 Q. Okay, thank you. Okay. And I'm guessing they -- do they
2 keep a log of that or is it just the chat plus --

3 A. Well, the chat is the log.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. To my knowledge, even I'm -- this is Miguel speaking, by the
6 way -- I'm not an STO or a chief and I haven't had training in
7 their department, I'm not exactly sure, like, what procedures they
8 go through once we tell them what -- I mean, usually we put it in
9 the chat and just let them know.

10 Q. Okay. And I'm sorry, how long did you say you've been --

11 A. Training?

12 Q. Yeah.

13 A. Nine, eleven -- upstairs, in the 19th floor?

14 Q. Sure.

15 A. Eleven weeks.

16 Q. Eleven, okay.

17 A. Before that, though, I had to go through PC training and
18 NORAC training, so I've been training since November.

19 Q. Okay. Just curious, 11 weeks, so that's a relatively short
20 period of time.

21 A. Yes.

22 Q. Have you seen a lot of -- are you seeing a lot of reports of
23 hey, we got sluggish power or --

24 A. Not too many of sluggish power, I've had other issues like
25 with fault lights and door lights and like power dying, things

1 happening, other type of mechanical issues.

2 MR. GRAUBARD: Okay. That's all I have for now, thank you.

3 BY MR. SHERRY:

4 Q. Rick Sherry, FRA. For Ken.

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Ken, where were you during this process as (indiscernible)?

7 A. Sitting right next to him.

8 Q. Sitting right next to -- STO, supervisor of train operations,
9 is that what that stands for, correct?

10 A. Yes, yeah. Yes, STO stands -- supervisor training officer.

11 Q. Officer. When you usually report something like that, is
12 that usually your response from the back?

13 A. Depending how busy they are, yeah, you put it in the chat,
14 you let them know, and you turn around and continue doing your
15 work.

16 MR. SHERRY: No further questions.

17 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

18 Q. Todd with the NTSB. This is for Ken. So to add onto Sherry,
19 so there's nothing different you would've done, you would've done
20 the same thing that Miguel did, just --

21 A. Yeah, exact -- this is Ken and yeah, exactly what he said.

22 Q. All right. And do you ever get an acknowledgement back from
23 an STO, like asking more questions or anything or no?

24 A. They may say, you know, keep an eye out, if it -- you know,
25 check with them further down the line, you know, if they have

1 anything further or if the problem resolves or gets worse. Other
2 than that --

3 Q. Do you ever ask to elaborate on the problems? We've been
4 hearing a lot of, you know, sluggish power, power off, just
5 different terms, do you ever ask, like, how bad it is or what
6 exactly you mean or anything, or do you just relay exactly what
7 they say to the back?

8 A. If they -- this is Ken -- if they would report sluggish
9 power, the first question would be do you have any fault lights,
10 to determine whether there's something wrong with the equipment.

11 If they don't report any fault lights, we -- I mean, we don't
12 know, I'm not mechanically trained, I'm not an engineer, I don't
13 know that much about that. My experience in the 11 years I've
14 been up there, this stuff, the equipment's almost as old as I am.
15 It's wearing out, that's it.

16 Q. I gotcha. Do you ever call mechanical to meet trains out on
17 the line of road?

18 A. Yeah -- this is Ken -- yes, they do it constantly, either at
19 Roberts Yard or at Powelton Yard.

20 Q. And when are you supposed to call mechanical?

21 A. Mechanical also monitors the chat, they --

22 Q. So you don't make a specific call to mechanical, you just put
23 it in the chat?

24 A. If there's an issue that we -- like, if a train is completely
25 broken down and unable to move, we will put it in the chat and

1 then contact mechanical for them to get on the radio and try and
2 resolve the problem with the crew. And we go back to doing our
3 job as a dispatcher.

4 Q. So not ever looking at the chat, how long is that chat
5 scroll, is it -- does it get a lot of stuff put on it throughout
6 the day?

7 A. It depends on how bad of a day they're having. It's a
8 continuous record, I could -- I could go back into the computer
9 and go back months and everything's in there.

10 MR. KRAHOLIK: Right. I don't have any further questions
11 right now.

12 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

13 Q. Ken, since they came up with this new emergency order process
14 there in March, have you had the same or is the number of calls
15 from the engineers, conductors, about bad power, dynamic, has it
16 -- is it about the same or do you see more reports or --

17 A. This is Ken. I'm going to say it's about the same, it's, you
18 know, no more, no less.

19 Q. Yeah. Do you get a lot -- so what is your -- hard to ask
20 this, but what's the number one thing that the crews report, the
21 train crews report?

22 A. I'm going to say mostly door issues --

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. -- where the trains are -- the doors are supposed to train
25 line, and if they don't, they can't take power --

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. -- so that's probably the number one.

3 Q. Okay. Have you had to swap out a lot of trains because of
4 mechanical issues or door issues or --

5 A. You're talking the entire 11 years I've been out there?

6 Q. Yeah.

7 A. Yeah.

8 Q. It happens quite often?

9 A. Yeah, it happens regularly.

10 Q. Miguel.

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. In your 11 weeks, have you been a part of some train crews
13 train swapping?

14 A. In 11 weeks, I'm going to say no, I have done a few, but so
15 far, from what I've observed, most of our train swaps usually have
16 been within Center City to Wayne. We don't do too many train
17 swaps on the -- like, I've worked 1-2 desk so far and then I did
18 the overnight, which isn't a lot of train movement, it's mostly
19 out-of-services and track car movements, so I haven't really had a
20 chance to experience many train swaps, but at the few that I have,
21 usually are done within, like, Suburban Station, Wayne, maybe
22 Civic, University of Penn, which is where we do most of our train
23 swaps, so most of them would be done -- I'll hopefully get a
24 chance to experience more of that later when I get into 3, 4, and
25 5 desks.

1 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay, thank you.

2 Shandel.

3 BY MS. WILLIAMS:

4 Q. Shandel Williams, Assistant Safety. Ken, two questions for
5 you, for clarification for the -- when you say we call mechanical,
6 is it you, as a dispatcher, or does the STO or the chief call
7 mechanical to get them to come to the holding place?

8 A. This is Ken. Depending on how busy everybody is, I may have
9 to do it myself or the chief or STO will do it.

10 Q. Okay. On a day where it is busy, would be the STO or the
11 chief that would call or would it be you?

12 MR. VASQUEZ: It's busy to you, right?

13 MR. PALAN: It depends. They may be in the bathroom --

14 MS. WILLIAMS: Yes.

15 MR. PALAN: -- or they may be -- don't -- so it's give or
16 take. If they're there, I -- it's either way.

17 BY MS. WILLIAMS:

18 Q. Okay. And then the other thing is I know you had mentioned
19 when trains report faults or report issues and one of the first
20 follow-up questions you said was are there any fault lights, is
21 that a question that you have learned to ask through your
22 knowledge or is there an SOP that posits that that should be a
23 question?

24 A. As far as I know, there's nothing stating that, but that is
25 just something that I've come along with that's just --

1 Q. Right.

2 A. -- nature.

3 Q. Oh, okay, right, so I know.

4 A. Um-hum.

5 MS. WILLIAMS: Okay, I gotcha. Okay, that's all I have.

6 BY MR. GRAUBARD:

7 Q. Dave Graubard, FRA, question for Ken. Is there any system or
8 process in place where if someone were -- a crew reports sluggish
9 power, for example, and you put it in the chat, is there any
10 system process audit, whatever, to ensure that mechanical or some
11 other responsible party is following up with any of those reported
12 issues or is it kind of just --

13 A. Well, it's been -- this is Ken. Recently, we've received
14 phone calls before we even contact RROCC mechanical --

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. -- they call us, so it's either way.

17 Q. Okay, all right. Second question, is there -- so sluggish
18 power is a pretty normal thing, is that fair to say?

19 A. It's a problem, it's one of the more minor problems, as far
20 as my response.

21 Q. Is there -- can you give some examples of something that
22 would like immediately cause an escalation where you're going
23 to --

24 A. If they were reporting sluggish power and reported that there
25 was any kind of burning smell or any kind of smoke at that time,

1 that would definitely escalate it.

2 MR. GRAUBARD: All right. Thank you, that's all I have.

3 BY MR. SHERRY:

4 Q. Rick Sherry, FRA. Question for Ken. Ken, you're aware this
5 is our -- SEPTA's third fire in six months?

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. In your position, and all three have been -- reported
8 sluggish power and have caught on fire, have you seen, from any of
9 your upper management to maybe escalate something sooner or to pay
10 more attention or give more detail in some way, shape, or form
11 when you hear this across the radio or has it been normal business
12 from January until now?

13 A. I'd say the increase would be more in the recent weeks than
14 it was, say, in January.

15 Q. So just recently, not after February, not after June, but
16 after this one we just had last week, you're seeing an uptick?

17 A. No, I'm going to say after the second one.

18 MR. SHERRY: After the second one, okay. No further
19 questions.

20 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

21 Q. Todd with the NTSB. Miguel, you're pretty new, so you
22 should've got trained on this, I would hope, so how do you know if
23 a new procedure comes out or changes, how are you notified of
24 that?

25 A. They sent the e-mail with the new SOP that's put in, then STO

1 will also print out a copy, if it requires a signature, we'll
2 sign. We'll read it and then sign it.

3 Q. And -- all right, that's good. So who --

4 A. That was Miguel.

5 Q. Who went over this -- the new one that came out the 25th, who
6 went over that one with you?

7 A. I can't remember, sorry.

8 Q. But somebody went over that with you?

9 A. I believe so, yes.

10 Q. And what's your understanding of the new policy that's in
11 place?

12 A. Anything, any mechanical issues reported with burning smells,
13 brake dynamics, anything brake-related, to have them come to a
14 stop at the closest station and put it in the chat, report it to
15 the STO and either cancel the train -- well, they will make that
16 determination, but people report it to them and mostly either
17 annul the train, get the people off board and get that taken to
18 the nearest facility, mechanical facility, whether that be Roberts
19 or Powelton.

20 MR. KRAHOLIK: Okay. I don't have any further questions.

21 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. Well, Miguel, Ken, do you have
22 anything you would like to add?

23 MR. VASQUEZ: No, sir.

24 MR. PALAN: No.

25 MR. BACHMEIER: If we have any follow-up questions, would you

1 mind if we contacted you?

2 MR. VASQUEZ: Sure, not a problem, has to be done.

3 MR. PALAN: (Indiscernible).

4 MR. BACHMEIER: On behalf of the NTSB and our interview crew
5 here, thank you for your time and cooperation.

6 MR. PALAN: Thank you.

7 MR. VASQUEZ: Thank you.

8 (Whereupon, at 3:27 p.m., the interview concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

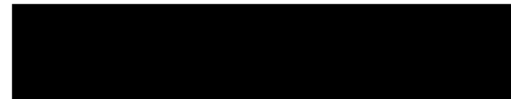
IN THE MATTER OF: FIRE ABOARD SEPTA TRAIN NEAR THE
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Interview of Kenneth Palan and Miguel
Vasquez

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD25FR006

PLACE: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

DATE: July 29, 2025

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.



Karen D. Martini
Transcriber