

Acting Chief of Staff, Katie Choe Testimony

Monday, June 26, 2023

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Chair Crighton, Chair Straus, and members of the Joint Committee. My name is Katie Choe, the MBTA's Acting Chief of Staff, and I am speaking today on behalf of the MBTA's Quality, Compliance & Oversight Office, or QCO. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the actions that the MBTA is taking to respond to the FTA's Safety Management Inspection and improve its safety culture. As I will discuss in my remarks, much work has been done to date to advance this effort and yet much work still remains. While we are measured against the benchmarks of the Safety Management Inspection response, our ultimate goal is to bring about positive, transformative, and sustainable change to the way the MBTA operates to produce a safety culture that is second to none and restore widespread public trust in our transit system.

Achieving this goal will take time, but I believe that the MBTA has the organizational will and leadership to succeed.

QCO HISTORY

The MBTA launched the Quality, Compliance & Oversight Office in August of 2022 to manage, implement, and oversee the response to the findings and directives in the FTA's Safety Management Inspection. QCO's mission is to ensure that all of the work results in broad, transformative, and sustainable change. That means identifying and addressing the systemic challenges underlying the degradation in safety outcomes, engaging employees at all levels in the organization, managing change such that we get the best possible outcomes, communicating progress transparently both to our employees and the public, and monitoring and verifying results over time to allow for continuous improvement.

Because QCO reports directly to the General Manager, we have broad authority to implement change across all departments and act as conveners and facilitators to ensure that all needs and perspectives are accounted for.

While QCO's focus right now is primarily on the Safety Management Inspection response, the office has a broad mandate to tackle any complex challenge that improves the MBTA's safety, service, or performance outcomes.

SMI Response

Since June 2022, under the Safety Management Inspection process, the FTA has issued to the MBTA 8 Special Directives with 42 Findings, 2 Immediate Action Letters, and one Request for Information. The MBTA has responded by developing 39 Corrective Action Plans and one similarly structured Workplan that are broken down into 599 separate Action Items. These action items are jointly tracked by the MBTA and the FTA. Each action item includes one or more submissions to the FTA. All Corrective Action Plans and the Workplan have been approved by the FTA and are being implemented.

As of June 18, the MBTA has made 304 submissions to the FTA, representing about 51% of the total action items. Of those, 162 have been accepted by the FTA, 137 are still under review, and 5 require resubmission.

Managing the SMI response is an administratively heavy process, which is one of the reasons why the MBTA established the Quality Compliance and Oversight Office. The MBTA meets with the FTA up to seven times a week to review progress and upcoming actions and spends a week each month monitoring and verifying the results of changes that have already been made.

While we track our progress against the Corrective Action Plans, we are more importantly tracking the broader outcomes of the efforts. Complex, systemic challenges require complex, systemic solutions. Improving our safety outcomes and culture will require significant staffing increases, training and professional development, data-driven decision frameworks, employee reporting networks, quality management programs, asset management improvements, and updated and documented policies, rules, and procedures. These are not challenges that can be solved in a day but take thought, time, and resources to be successful.

COMMITMENT TO TRANSPARENCY

In order to rebuild trust with the public and with our employees, we must be transparent about the MBTA's problems, solutions, and progress. To demonstrate our commitment to transparency, the MBTA established www.mbta.com/FTAResponse, a website that provides the public with status updates on progress made on each of the 8 Special Directives and the April 2023 Immediate Action Letter. All of the Corrective Action Plans and the approved Workplan are available on the website. We are in the process of expanding the site to include subpages which will provide additional background on the problems identified by the Safety Management Inspection and the actions that the MBTA is taking to solve them. In addition to the website, Quality Compliance and Oversight publicly reports to the MBTA Board of Directors twice monthly on the progress and outcomes of the Safety Management Inspection response.

EARLY OUTCOMES

While the Corrective Action Plan timelines extend into 2026, the MBTA has had some early success outcomes.

- After revising train movement procedures last August, the number of unintended vehicle movements was reduced to zero in the last 10 months compared to 6 in the previous 18 months.
- 21 Dispatchers were hired for the Operations Control Center and all dispatchers and motorpersons have active certifications
- This month, the MBTA is publishing its first operating rulebook update since 2018.
- The MBTA issued a new Personal Protective Equipment policy to protect workers on the tracks and provided over 3,500 pairs of free boots to its employees.
- A new industry-leading speed restriction dashboard was developed and published on the MBTA website.
- HR on the Go, a mobile HR department and job fair, was launched, bringing job opportunities directly to interested candidates.
- The MBTA's first Quality Management Plan was published, establishing standards for Quality Assurance across the Authority

- The Green Line Work Train was restored to service, resulting in the first closed Corrective Action Plan of the Safety Management Inspection and, more importantly, allowing the Engineering and Maintenance crews to more efficiently perform track and power work.
- New Safety Hotline protocols were established that better protect reporting employees from fear of retaliation.
- New procedures were established to protect employees working around live trains
- And, over 2000 people have been trained in skills to protect themselves on the tracks

We have also seen tangible improvements in the safety culture of the organization, as evidenced by increased reporting of safety or near miss events when they happen and the proactive identification of improvement opportunities to the inspection procedures undertaken prior to a train going into service.

CONCLUSION

The level and magnitude of the changes we are prompting at the MBTA will not happen overnight. We have embarked on a multi-year process to establish transformative and sustainable change within the organization. In order to become truly sustainable however, positive change must become deeply embedded in the culture of the workforce of the organization. While establishing cultural change takes time, the benefit is permanent.

Thank you.