

**Statement of Eric Colts, Bus Operator
Member of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26, Detroit, MI
House Committee on Oversight
May 21, 2020**

Members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on the sacrifices being made by essential workers, including transit workers, since the onset of the Coronavirus.

I am a bus driver with DDOT, the Detroit Department of Transportation. I've been on the job for about four years. I'm a member of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 26, and on behalf of all the transit workers in Detroit and across America who are on the front lines right now, putting their own lives at risk, I appreciate the opportunity to give you some insight into the day in the life of a bus driver in the middle of a pandemic.

I'm also here today on behalf of bus drivers who can no longer speak, like my best friend Jason Hargrove, who was another 50-year old Detroit bus driver. On March 21, Jason posted a Facebook Live video complaining about one of his passengers who was openly coughing several times on his bus without covering her mouth. Eleven days later, Jason died of COVID-19. Jason loved his job and was proud to do it. He was always concerned about his passengers. I wish I could say that Jason, who was a big man at 6' 3", didn't suffer much, but it wouldn't be true. His temperature soared, his fingertips turned blue, and he couldn't breathe. We all miss him terribly.

Driving a bus in Detroit has always been a tough job, even before the Coronavirus. Drivers get attacked on moving vehicles regularly. People don't like paying fares or being told about regulations, and they get angry about the service, so they often take out their frustrations on the drivers. ATU members all across the country have been assaulted. We have no barriers to protect us.

Now, we are being attacked by an invisible enemy. I drive everyday not knowing who's at each stop, or who they've been in contact with. Each time a passenger coughs just a few feet behind me, my hands grip the wheel a bit tighter, as I know that I'm in a potential death trap. Social distancing on a bus is extremely hard to do. Passengers are at times packed together like sardines – nowhere near the CDC guidelines, and it's just going to get worse as the state starts to reopen.

In Detroit, passengers are provided with masks if they do not have one, but I drive in the intercity where homeless people are currently boarding the buses for free, and the box of 50 masks on the bus usually disappears quickly.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is a constant challenge. It took some time, but DDOT did finally issue workers protective masks, but only one mask per employee. They didn't tell us how to wear it or clean it. In order to protect myself from contracting the virus at work and bringing it home to my family, I decided to order a N-95 mask online many weeks ago. It still hasn't arrived.

Even the day my friend Jason posted that video, he asked his wife to buy more Lysol to keep his bus clean. It should not be the responsibility of the drivers or the union to secure PPE, but that's what's happening at many transit systems across America right now. We wouldn't ask a firefighter

to enter a burning building with a bathing suit and a water gun. Why are bus drivers in some places working without masks and hand sanitizer? This is not what I signed up for when I left the retail business and became a bus driver.

It's no surprise that nationwide, thousands of transit workers have already tested positive for COVID-19, and hundreds have died. ATU members are getting infected at a rate that is much higher than the general population because we are continuously exposed to large crowds of transit-dependent riders at close range without the necessary PPE to keep us safe. Also, the buses we drive have major issues with air flow, air sterilization, and filters. When a bus is moving forward, it creates reversed airflow in the cabin, bringing unhealthy air into the driver's workstation. The buses have dangerous airflow with recycled and very poorly filtered air.

The Coronavirus has shown the world the true meaning of "essential" workers. We are the ones who people rely upon to survive when everything around us shuts down. Since the pandemic began, transit workers have put their own lives on the line, bravely reporting to work every day, driving riders in our communities to the doctor, the grocery store, and the pharmacy. We make sure that nurses and other hospital workers get to their jobs to care of our family members and friends who are suffering.

Finally, I'd like to say to everyone: if you don't have to go out, please stay home. This virus will not go away if everyone keeps moving. For the love of our fellow human beings, please stop moving and if you have to go out, please be safe by wearing a mask and practice social distancing.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.