

Good Afternoon Council Member Bowser, Members of the Committee and Committee Staff,

My name is Ben Merrion and I would like to present testimony, as others have today, on the issue of public sexual harassment on DC Metro trains and buses.

I have volunteered with several projects led by the organizations represented here today and this has led me to be educated about this issue and how bystanders can help to prevent it. I have previously witnessed women being verbally sexually harassed at various Metro stations including recently, the Fort Totten and Takoma Metro stations. Before learning about the issue, though I knew something was wrong, I didn't know what I could do about it and didn't realize how prevalent it is.

After I started learning about this issue and being involved in efforts to help, many women have told me of experiencing and witnessing harassment and assault on the Metro. One of them is my sister. For a while, I didn't understand why she tried to avoid taking public transportation when there was that option. After learning about my involvement in this cause, she told me that she had been groped on a DC Metro train and this experience affected her so much that she never wants to take Metro again.

Recently, Metro's Deputy Police Chief has said that they have not seen an increase in reports of various sexual assaults and that victims who think they have been harassed should report these incidents to transit police. However, it seems that people do not know they can do this. When I asked my sister if she reported this incident, this is what she told me:

No, I did not. Who would I report it to – the Metro people? I can't imagine them caring about something like that. If they actually had something in place, I might have, even though I probably wouldn't remember the details that were involved like what the guy looked like or where he was going, but I may have used an escort for the rest of my journey.

She told me that knowing about a line to report this to and having a way of getting an escort to be with her would have made her feel safer and she may not have quit using Metro. Many DC residents experience being sexually harassed regularly on Metro trains, buses and at Metro stations; and some victims have reported that Metro employees themselves have committed this behavior. Some, like my sister, do not report these incidents. Some who do, as you have heard today, are laughed at or dismissed.

That metro employees have been not only not sufficiently responsive to this issue but also have participated in this behavior themselves is absolutely reprehensible and this jeopardizes the safety of all metro customers. For if I see this behavior happening and I want to do something about it, what confidence do I have that transit staff will be concerned about my safety if I wish to intervene when they appear to not be at all concerned about the victims themselves and are also themselves harassers?

All of these observations lead me to strongly urge Metro to fund a public awareness campaign to collect data on sexual harassment and to be trained in handling these incidents. Metro is losing customers because these things are not in place.

As someone who is a bystander to acts of public sexual harassment, I believe an awareness campaign could help to greatly prevent and/or disrupt these types of incidents. Since becoming involved with this effort, I have learned techniques which I have used to stop harassment on Metro such as acting like I'm lost and asking the harasser for directions, which helps the victim get away.

Metro, though, needs to do education itself on how to handle and report these incidents. However, in order for Metro to take action, Metro staff and officials have to recognize that this is an extremely serious and urgent safety concern which affects all Metro customers.

Council Member Bowser, I strongly urge you to help Metro take action to address the concerns we have informed you of today.

Thank you for letting me testify.