

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

I ask you to raise your hand if you have you been sexually harassed on the Metro. How about on the streets of DC? Most studies on sexual harassment and assault in public spaces find that 80-100% of the female respondents say they have been harassed at one point in their life. My name is Chai Shenoy **and I am a Ward 4 registered voter** and I co-founded and run Collective Action for Safe Spaces, a grassroots organization that aims to empower the DC Metro area to build a community free from public sexual harassment and assault. We do this through online activism, public policy and advocacy, community workshops, and innovative direct services. We started Collective Action for Safe Spaces in 2009 with a simple online presence via a blog called Holla Back DC!. We asked our friends and our networks to submit their experiences of street harassment to us through an anonymous form. We took individual experiences, posted it on the blog, and allowed the public to comment on the experiences. The online presence became an important tool for individuals across the DC Metro area to air their experiences and get support from the online community, as well as tips on how to address street harassment. Many of the experiences came from individuals traveling the Metro, on the buses, leaving or entering stations. The perpetrator(s) were private citizens or Metro employees themselves.

I started Collective Action for Safe Spaces after my own personal experience in 2008. On a June weekend in 2009, I got on the Red line at Silver Spring. It was my first time on the Metro as a newly returned resident of the area. I was in a car with barely anyone. At Takoma metro station, a man walked in. While on the phone with one of my girlfriends, I made note of him because the car was empty. Oddly enough, he kept looking at me while figuring out where to sit. I continued my conversation on the phone and from the corner of my eye, I saw him staring at me. I ignored him. His gaze continued. And, slowly, he spread his legs, where I saw that he was wearing no underwear. I felt my face getting red and yet I didn't react because I knew that is what he was hoping for. I felt humiliated and terrified at the same time since no one else was in the car. At Fort Totten, I recall him getting up and going into a more crowded car. Later that evening, I reflected back on the incident and felt anger, terror, and shame. But, beyond anything, I felt guilty that I did not stop him. Here I was a lawyer, an activist who felt these emotions and didn't know what to do. What if he went into the next car and exposed himself to a teenage young woman? How would that shape her identity? How about her safety in public spaces?

I knew I wasn't alone. And with over 400 experiences later, I know I am not the only one who has experienced public sexual harassment and assault in DC.

In 2011 alone, our website collected at least 62 experiences (out of 213) that were Metro-related incidents. For example, here is one that a passenger submitted her experience that took place at Takoma Metro during morning rush hour. A man approached her and asked her what her name was. Now, as a rational person, that would be fine. We want polite individuals in our society. But, when she answered in the positive that she had a boyfriend, he continued to question her about having sex with her. At that point, she writes, **"I walked as far down the platform as possible until the train arrived, all with the individual following me until I boarded a train car.** (See [here](#) for live post).

On March 28, 2011, a Yellow line rider submitted a disturbing story. She reported that a young man will "stand **behind young women and press up against them closely with his hips,**

pretending train is too crowded.” She said that at first she thought it was only her, then she saw it happen to another woman who “pushed him off he moved through the car to another woman.” She did let the police know about this incident. (See [here](#) for live post).

And, we’ve received a handful of upskirting incidents. This one happened at Waterfront Metro on the Green line. The woman wrote that she “noticed a man standing very close to me, on the next step down on the escalator. I took a step up, and he did as well. I felt something graze my inner thigh and turned around quickly. He had his arm reached out under my skirt and was snapping a picture.” (See [here](#) for live post).

These aren’t isolated incidents. They happen to paying passengers of WMATA every day. And, we want that to end or at the very least for WMATA to take this issue as a public safety concern. And WMATA can in at least three ways:

1. There should be a multi-agency working group collecting data on the prevalence of public sexual harassment and assault on WMATA. WMATA, with its unique jurisdictional issues, should be engaged with the local police in data collection. For example, a person submitted to us that on the evening of March 18, after 11:00 pm, she was walking home from the Friendship Heights metro west along Western Avenue, about 1.5 blocks from the metro, when she heard footsteps behind her and then felt a hand up her skirt touching her on her genitals. She thought he was going to pull her into the bushes by the Geico building and rape her. She reported the crime to MPD, but that crime was likely not reported to the Transit police. The perpetrator may have been involved in other crimes near the metro. He may have been taking similar actions on the metro. (See [here](#) for full account) Crime doesn’t stop as soon as the person leaves the fare gates. The fact is that crime continues, as does the crime of harassment and sexual assault.
2. WMATA should fund a public service announcement (PSA) campaign to be present on buses, metro, and at all bus shelters and metro stations. This campaign would have the input of organizations like Collective Action for Safe Spaces that publicize a dedicated line, or at the very minimum the Transit Police number, for individuals to call if they were harassed or assaulted on the metro or bus. Boston, New York, and Chicago have all done these PSAs informing the public to report these crimes. With the numbers on our blog and what the Transit Police indicate are reported crimes from last year, a PSA campaign would assist in educating the public of the seriousness of sexual harassment and assault and that we will not tolerate it.
3. With the increase of violent crime, as reported in the Washington Times on February 19, 2012, we need to emphasize training WMATA employees and Transit Police on how to handle complaints of sexual harassment and assault. We want to encourage individuals to say something if they feel or see something. We don’t want to discourage victims from coming forward. And right now, WMATA and Transit Police **do** not have a good track record of addressing the complaints of public sexual harassment and assault. As the Transit Police Deputy Chief Ron Pavlik was quoted in the Washington Post on February 19, 2012, “Someone telling another person: ‘You look good. Can I have your phone number?’ — you may not like it, but I can’t arrest the person.” Correct. Someone asking you for your phone number is not harassment. However, someone asking for your number when you say no or ignore them or in another way attempt to dismiss them, and

that individual continues to follow you, that may be considered harassment. And that should not be dismissed because it started off with something quite banal as asking for a phone number.

Council Member Bower, we have “seen something” and “said something” now we want WMATA to do something. I strongly urge you to make Metro take action to address the concerns of almost 30% of those who submitted to our website had the courage to share in an online platform in the past year. Not only will the data help to keep track of the problem, it would possibly assist in understanding crime patterns. A PSA will ensure that more people are reporting and creating a culture of zero tolerance. And having our first responders better equipped to this issue area can only assist in a zero tolerance culture of public sexual harassment and assault. This is a serious and urgent safety concern that affects all metro customers and because the District now has a surplus instead of a deficit, there is no reason why these solutions cannot be adopted.

Thank you for letting me testify.

Appendices

I was traveling from VA to MD on the orange line with my thirteen month old son, and was in the rear of the metro car by the door, with my son in his stroller beside me in the aisle. There was a man sitting on the other side of the door, and a couple sitting on the other end of the car, facing the other way. I was working on a crossword puzzle, and I saw the man moving in a strange way from the corner of my eye. I disregarded it, since it is the metro, and he stood up and stepped over to lean against the glass by the metro door, where I could not help but see that he was masturbating.

I stood up and said very loudly, “What do you think you’re doing?!” and tried to push the stroller back towards the couple at the front of the car. The elderly gentleman at the front of the car saw what was going on, and began yelling at the pervert, while the woman helped me get the stroller around the poles and towards their end of the car.

The entire time, the pervert was yelling that I’m a fat bitch, and that this “wansn’t at me,” and when the metro stopped he ran off the train at Landover station. I filed a report with WMATA right away, but the transit police were not very optimistic that he would be caught.

Submitted by ECH on 3.27.11

Location: Minnesota Ave.

Time of harassment: Day Time (9:30A-3:30P)

<http://www.collectiveactiondc.org/2011/04/07/masturbator-on-the-metro/>