



www.legalaiddc.org
1331 H Street, NW
Suite 350
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 628-1161

**Testimony of Jeremiah Lowery
Policy Director, Systemic Advocacy and Law Reform
Legal Aid DC**

**Before the Committee on Transportation & the Environment
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Performance Oversight Hearing Regarding the Washington Metropolitan Area
Transit Authority**

March 3, 2025

Legal Aid DC¹ submits the following testimony regarding the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

Public transportation is an essential service that should be treated as a public good, not a commodity. Yet, in our current system, transit fares disproportionately impact low-income residents, deepening social and economic inequities.

According to 2024 data from WMATA, approximately 70% of bus riders in Washington, D.C., evade fares². This is not an issue of widespread lawlessness but rather a reflection of economic hardship. Currently, 68% of D.C. bus riders come from households earning below \$50,000 annually, while 49% of rail riders come from households earning below

¹ Legal Aid DC is the oldest and largest general civil legal services program in the District of Columbia. The largest part of our work is comprised of individual representation in housing, domestic violence/family, public benefits, and consumer law. We also work on immigration law matters and help individuals with the collateral consequences of their involvement with the criminal legal system. From the experiences of our clients, we identify opportunities for court and law reform, public policy advocacy, and systemic litigation. For more information, visit www.LegalAidDC.org.

² (2024, October 8). Metro bus fare evasion in D.C. *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vi/2024/10/08/metro-bus-dc-fare-evasion/>

\$75,000³. The cost of transit is a significant burden on these individuals, many of whom rely on the bus as their primary mode of transportation.

Public Transit as a Public Good

Public transit is essential for many groups, including seniors, students, and individuals with disabilities. Treating it as a commodity rather than a necessity limits access for those who need it most. In 2024, eliminating fares could have made transit more accessible and could have created a safer environment for transit employees.

The Inequity of Transit Costs

Transportation in D.C. remains fundamentally inequitable. Public transit fares function as a regressive tax, disproportionately affecting those who can least afford them – much like sales taxes hurt low-income consumers the most. The failure to view public transit as a public good exacerbates these inequalities, creating disparities between working-class riders and those who can afford rail fares or personal vehicles.

Fare-free buses would have put money back in their pockets in 2024, allowing them to cover essential expenses like housing, childcare, and food while also ensuring they can move freely and efficiently through the city.

Fare Enforcement is Not the Solution

Rather than implementing fare-free bus service, The DC Council and Mayor have worked with WMATA on initiatives to increase fare compliance, including deploying plainclothes and undercover officers aboard buses. This approach is costly, difficult to implement, and criminalizes poverty. Additionally, fare enforcement places transit workers in uncomfortable and often dangerous positions, increasing their risk of exposure to violence. More importantly, it reinforces the harmful notion that public transit – unlike libraries, schools, or parks – is not a public good. Instead of the DC Council and Mayor doubling down on enforcement measures that disproportionately target working-class Washingtonians, we should prioritize policies that decommodify public transportation and ensure equitable access for all.

The Council has recognized the importance of [free public transit in the past](#). A fare-free bus system would have significantly alleviated financial strain on residents. A daily commuter would save approximately \$1,300 per year, assuming one round trip per day,

³ DC Council: Office of the Budget Director. (n.d.). *Chartbook on Metro For D.C. Amendment Act (COW Committee Print) & Fare-Free Bus Funding Emergency Amendment Act*. DC Council. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://www.dccouncilbudget.com/metro-for-dc-study>

five days per week, for 52 weeks⁴. These savings would provide tangible financial relief to low-income workers, allowing them to redirect funds toward other essential expenses. Funding for DC's fare free bus program does not need to be barrier. The Just Recovery DC Coalition, of which Legal Aid is a member, proposes an equitable land value tax as well as other equitable tax structures, that the District can use to fund fare free buses.

A Call to Action

The failure to implement the Metro for D.C. fare-free bus program was a missed opportunity for progress. This initiative, which was derailed by the Mayor and the Chief Financial Officer's office in late 2022 and early 2023, would have provided free bus service to all D.C. residents. By delaying this investment, the District has failed workers and residents in need.

⁴ DC Council: Office of the Budget Director. (n.d.). *Chartbook on Metro For D.C. Amendment Act (COW Committee Print) & Fare-Free Bus Funding Emergency Amendment Act*. DC Council. Retrieved February 24, 2025, from <https://www.dccouncilbudget.com/metro-for-dc-study>