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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY RADIO

How Metro Service Cuts Pose Extra Challenges For Low-Income Riders

Maggie Farley



Like many Metro commuters struggling to make ends meet, Oumar Koumbassa has been disproportionately affected by SafeTrack troubles.

Mikaela Lefrak / WAMU

It's 8:30 a.m. and Oumar Koumbassa is flashing his ID as he walks into school. Most people are just beginning their day. But because of SafeTrack shutdowns, Oumar has already spent two and a half hours on buses and trains to get to his English classes at Carlos Rosario International Charter School.

Metro is midway through a year of rolling station closures to tackle long-delayed repairs. When they are done, it will mean a safer, more reliable ride for commuters. But the disruptions — and proposed permanent cuts — have hidden costs for people like Koumbassa who don't have other ways to get around.



Millions of Washington-area commuters have seen their lives disrupted by SafeTrack, few more-so than hourly workers and parents. Try out our new game **Commuter Challenge** and see for yourself if you can make ends meet.

“Every day, I take four buses and two trains or four trains. Every day,” says Koumbassa, who arrived from Guinea eight months ago. He found a job after four months of looking in Olney, Maryland — more than 30 miles from his home in Southeast Washington, D.C.

After working all night, he joins rush-hour commuters to come back into the city for school. When the Red Line shut down for SafeTrack repairs, his commute grew from four hours to six. At his \$11 an hour wage, an Uber is out of the question.

“I think it's a very, very difficult commute for me, it's very, very hard,” Koumbassa says. “But I have to do it, I have to do it because I don't have another chance, or another opportunity yet.”

Low-income riders disproportionately affected

From the lobby windows in his school, you can see the Metro workers fixing the tracks at the Rhode Island Avenue station. Adult students come here to learn things like English, Computer Science and Culinary Arts.

They have come from 85 different countries to D.C., and from many different neighborhoods to this school. But in December, the nearby station shut down for 25 days — and like commuters all over the Washington area affected by Metro repairs, these students' difficult daily journeys suddenly got a lot harder.



Like Oumar Koumbassa, left, many students at Carlos Rosario International Charter School are also juggling work and parental responsibilities.

Mikaela Lefrak / WAMU

Assistant Principal Chenniah Patrick stands by the front door, giving her students high fives,

telling them, “Happy Friday!” and “Make it happen!”

“Our classes are five days a week for three hours, and some of our students are parents working full-time jobs,” she says. “So it is something to celebrate when they finally make it to Friday and they are on time.”

Oumar and the other students may have harder commutes than most people, but there are many people like them who are stuck with taking the train. While nearly everyone we interviewed wants transportation they can count on, SafeTrack suspensions are showing that the hardship falls more heavily on low-income communities. Metro’s big challenge is balancing the needs of its riders with the need for long-postponed repairs to upgrade the system.

When Metro proposed permanent cuts in service, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act requires they investigate whether the changes will put an unequal burden on minorities. The study did conclude that reduction in late night service and fare increases would affect low-income riders and minorities disproportionately.

Metro General Manager Paul Wiedefeld says that the legal justification for proceeding is that there is simply no other choice.

“We try to minimize, obviously, the impact on everyone,” he said after WMATA’s board meeting on Jan. 26. “The approach we’ve taken is that the safety of all the individuals sort of trumps the other issues. That’s the approach we’ve taken and will continue to take.”

Different approaches to transportation equity

If Metro’s proposed budget goes through, fares will rise up to 25 cents, and the late-night service cuts will become permanent. That will give Metro more time and money to maintain the system. But already, restaurants, hotels, and janitorial services have had to change their hours and pay scales to make sure workers can make the last train at midnight.

Will Artley, the executive chef at the Hilton Garden Inn near the White House, says he has lost employees because they had no way to get home late at night.

Oumar Koumbassa’s commute has ballooned to six hours every day between work, school and home. Mikaela Lefrak / WAMU

“A lot of restaurants have had to shift because everybody has to be out the door by 11:30, 11:45 p.m. tops, and they’re sprinting to get their last train,” Artley says. He has had to give raises and pay for rides home to keep his staff intact. “The Metro is pushing the cost onto the people who least have the income to support that.”

D.C. Councilman Jack Evans (D-Ward 2), who was just re-elected as director of WMATA’s board, says reducing services always hits some communities harder — that’s why he is a staunch opponent of fare hikes and service cuts.

“There’s always an equity issue,” says Evans. “I don’t think we should ever reduce services or raise fares, because again, people at the low end of the income scale are the ones who are most affected by that and are most in need of public transportation. If it were up to me, it would be free.”

Robert Puentes, who heads the non-profit Eno Center for Transportation, says that Metro was designed for another kind of city, where jobs and workers were located in the center. But as the city changes, and more jobs and people are located farther out, the transport system has to change too.

“The regional conversation around Metro shouldn’t just be about how well the system is moving a whole lot of people in and out of downtown during the morning and evening commute,” Puentes says. “It also needs to be about how well that service is providing accessibility to economic opportunity for wide ranges of the population.”

Puentes says that other cities like Tampa Bay and Kansas City are partnering with ride-sharing services like Uber and Lyft to get riders to and from the train stations.

“There are so many innovations that are happening on the transportation side that there is no reason why this region should not be able to solve a range of different problems,” he says.

“And at the top of the list should be trying to make sure that low-income households have access and just as much economic opportunity as folks who live in these high-density transit corridors do.”

In the meantime, people like Oumar Koumbassa are finding that opportunity is often at the end of a long train ride.

“For people who have a long commute like me, if you don’t have another opportunity, you don’t have another chance, you need to keep on,” he says. “Maybe one day it will be changed. I have that hope.”

<http://wamu.org/story/17/01/30/metro-service-cuts-pose-extra-challenges-low-income-riders/>