

# Transit Riders Organize

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ple with disabilities, people of color, low income people, a lot of mom with kids.” Fleek said. “It’s really a microcosm of some of the most diverse parts of our society.”

Many members of Bus Riders Unite, which includes transit-dependent people and transit riders, have expressed in public forums facilitated by OPAL an uneasiness with the rise of police and uniformed security presence on public transportation, particularly in the months since the May 2017 fatal stabbing of two men who came to the aid of two young girls on a MAX train who were being harassed with racist taunts, Fleek said.

Last year, a ruling in *State v. Valderrama* determined that an incident involving Portland police officers doing a fare check of a TriMet passenger and public official, Ana del Rocio, was unconstitutional. That incident, which started as a fare evasion encounter from a TriMet officer in March, resulted in del Rocio’s temporary arrest. Fleek said that case is a great example of why TriMet should seek to have a more customer service, rather than public policing, focus.

“I ride the bus every single day. And I feel less safe now than when I did on the transit system before, not because I’m worried a white supremacist is going to stab me [...] I’m scared because I see police officers on the bus with guns all the time. In no way does that calm me or make me feel like I’m a safer person,” Fleek said.

Through those community forums, it was brought to the attention of OPAL the existence of a former Rider Advocate program for public transport in Portland from 1994-2009. The program was run by the Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods and funded through a contract with TriMet. The year it was cut, the Rider Advocate program was the recipient of the City of Portland’s Public Safety Partner Award for creating what the City called “a safer environment for all who ride TriMet by using conflict resolution skills and de-escalation techniques.”

TriMet’s Altstadt said the previous Rider Advocate pro-



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Yellow-vested Tristan Isaac (left) and Shanice Clarke (right) are leaders of the transit equity advocacy group Bus Riders Unite. The photo (above) shows them at a transit stop speaking to community members about how to obtain reduced-price fares for low income people.

gram saw “limited success” and was cut due to budget shortfalls, the qualifications of the advocates, and some of the intervention methods they used.

Altstadt said that TriMet tries to make sure their own staff and contracted security personnel are trained in “conflict avoidance, that they pass all safe certification that is needed, and to make sure that there’s accountability for any issues that would rise up.”

“We cannot speak to the training of third-party ‘rider advocates’ or the accuracy of the information they provide,” Altstadt said, adding that any customers who have questions about their services should contact TriMet customer service at 503-238-7433.

OPAL was able to test the waters with their version of the citizen-led advocate program thanks in part to a

\$17,500 city grant they received last year, which helped them pay for things like training and bus passes for the volunteers. The revived, and unofficial, rider advocate effort is also endorsed by the bus driver’s union, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757.

It’s OPAL’s aspiration that TriMet officially take on the program once again, and add an official Rider Advocate program back into their budget.

There are about 25 of the volunteer advocates in the meantime who have gone out at least once, and a core group of about 10 who have gone out multiple times on buses and MAX Lines, Fleek said. The program had been building since the middle of last year, with volunteers first coming onto the buses as rider advocates this past October, after receiving training, he added.

Another component of the OPAL’s pilot program is for volunteers to carry TriMet tickets with them, to be used as a resolution to conflicts.

“Most of the time on transit, the problems that arise can easily be resolved through a kindly, de-escalated practice, and occasionally just assisting people with their fare. Which is substantially less expensive than trying to put that person through the court system or spending money on police officers to be enforcing their fares,” Fleek said.

The volunteers aren’t vigilantes, Fleek emphasized. “When somebody has a weapon and is threatening to use it, those are situations where we think it’s appropriate for the police to intervene, if there’s imminent danger.”

To honor an icon of transportation-related civil rights, OPAL celebrated its second annual Transit Equity Day on Rosa Parks’ birthday Monday, Feb. 4.

Fleek said it’s important to remember that Parks, whose refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus in 1955 during segregation in Montgomery, Alabama, and helped spark the Civil Rights movement, was more than just a tired seamstress who spontaneously decided to refuse to move that day.

“Rosa Parks was an organizer and that’s something that’s often lost when we talk about the struggle for civil rights,” Fleek said. “Transportation has always been a really central consideration of the civil rights struggle. We see ourselves as continuing that.”

Fleek said the kind of non-violent, direct action that Rosa Parks engaged in has been reflected in the Bus Riders Unite’s efforts, particularly in TriMet’s recent adoption of a low income fare and the extension of transfer times by half an hour.

Eventually, Fleek said, OPAL would like to see the complete elimination of fares and instead pay for public transport entirely by utilizing state and federal taxes that already partially fund public transportation in the state.

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