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Public Transit, Public Support, and Public Hostility: The CTA's Role in the Homelessness Crisis

By Natalie Floreancig



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Paper presented to:

Instructional Professor, Chad Broughton

Instructional Assistant, Saliem Shehadeh

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Abstract

The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) has invested significant time and money into developing homeless outreach programs. Thresholds and Haymarket Center offer services on the trains themselves while The Night Ministry sets up outreach hubs at two stations. Drawing on interviews with staff from these outreach organizations, a researcher, a CTA bus driver, and several people who have sheltered on transit, this paper examines the dynamics between the CTA, outreach workers, and homeless riders, and analyzes how the CTA can best support a population with diverse backgrounds, needs, and desires. Ultimately, the CTA needs to address the inconsistency of its employees' treatment of homeless riders and shift its focus even further from getting people off the trains towards prioritizing helping the homeless on their system. The CTA must also continue to invest in the existing outreach programming. Public transit cannot be separated from the homelessness crisis, and these essential outreach programs help it to have a positive impact on the homeless.

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Exiting the Blue Line at O’Hare around midnight is a stark departure from the windy, somewhat grimy stations in the middle of the Kennedy Expressway that are common on the north end of the route. While other stations have felt eerily deserted, the platform at O’Hare is packed with Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) workers performing an almost disturbingly thorough cleaning of the platform. Several men and women are spraying large hoses. Giant fans propel some sort of cleaning solution through the air, misting the riders as they walk down the platform towards the airport. The chemical odors are so strong that it is almost a relief to ride the escalator off the platform towards the deserted airport.

A woman rides up in the elevator carrying a suitcase and a cat litter bucket and is immediately greeted by a police officer. “They don’t have anything,” he tells her. “They’re not going to be here until four.” She piles her stuff into the corner next to a door with a sign taped on it that reads “We don’t have anything” in messy handwriting. Soon, another man joins her. “They don’t have anything,” she relays to him, “not even snacks.” The two of them appear to doze off in impressive poses, him completely upright, her standing up while leaning on her suitcase for support. Across the room another man is sprawled out on the ground. A third man soon joins and strikes up a conversation with the man who seemed to be sleeping while standing up. The third man, who I’ll call Chris¹, has been sleeping on the train for three years. His friend, Sam, has been sleeping on the train for ten years.

Chris and Sam are just two of many hundreds of Chicagoans who find themselves sheltering on trains. In 2024, two Blue Line stations and two Red Line stations accounted for 46% of the unsheltered people observed during the city’s annual Point in Time count of the homeless population (in this case unsheltered only refers to the subset of the homeless population

¹ All respondents referred to only by first names are given pseudonyms.

not staying in a shelter) (DFSS, 2024). Tonight, Chris, Sam, and a couple of others are waiting for food that they will never receive from a storeroom in O’Hare International Airport, the northern end of Chicago’s Blue Line (one of two 24-hour train lines in the city). Chris and Sam insist that this situation is not unusual, describing how the workers there are often reluctant to distribute food. Sometimes the workers get frustrated when homeless riders knock on the door to the storeroom. Despite this, Chris and Sam have no choice but to keep returning.

From the grim picture at O’Hare, one might think that the CTA has abandoned any attempts at helping unhoused riders. However, the CTA has invested a significant amount of money in providing services for the homeless. In 2022, they launched a pilot program with the Department of Family and Support Services (DFSS), allowing two organizations, Haymarket Center and Thresholds, to provide services on the Red and Blue Line trains (the two trains that run for 24-hours). Additionally, they allow The Night Ministry to set up service hubs at the Howard and Forest Park stations one night per week. These groups provide essential services ranging from food and clothing to assistance with housing applications. Additionally, they offer harm-reduction, which, according to Haymarket Center’s website, is “an approach to substance use treatment that acknowledges the possibility of relapse and equips people with critical resources to reduce likelihood of infection and death should they resume using substances” (Haymarket Center, 2023). From January 2023 to September 2024, the pilot program had over 17,580 interactions with homeless riders, helped 104 people move into housing, and assisted 240 people with moving into shelters (CTA, 2024a). An agreement to fund two more years of outreach at up to \$2 million per year was established at the end of 2024 (CTA, 2024a).

The CTA is not alone in their development of programming relating to homeless riders. A survey conducted by the Transportation Research Board in 2016 found that all eight of the large transit systems they surveyed (which they classified as those operating 1,000 or more vehicles per day) considered homelessness a major issue (Boyle, 2016). In response, some transit agencies have started a variety of different homeless outreach programs. However, these programs are still relatively rare in the grand scheme of transit agencies across the United States. Loukaitou-Sideris et. al (2020) found that roughly 50% of the transit agencies they surveyed conducted ‘sweeps’ of areas in their systems where homeless people congregated, and roughly 50% used hostile architecture. Examples of hostile architecture include “seat dividers”, “landscaping to discourage sleeping”, and “spikes and metal studs” (Loukaitou-Sideris et. al, 2021, pps. 27-28). Comparatively, only 31.4% of the transit agencies offered free or reduced fares for homeless riders, which was the highest frequency of a positive response that Loukaitou-Sideris et. al (2020) measured. The co-existence of punitive and helpful interventions, sometimes within the same transit system, confuse both commuters and the homeless themselves about the homeless’ right to exist on public transit. These contradictory messages can be extremely detrimental to those relying on transit for shelter. Working to align the needs of homeless riders, the CTA, and the outreach organizations is a complex but necessary task.

Institutionally, the CTA sends a message that homeless riders are welcome on the system, at least temporarily. In a 2024 video posted on the CTA’s Instagram page, Chief Financial Officer Tom McKone stated

We do want to urge our customers and everybody to remember that it’s not a crime to be homeless. It’s not a crime to not have a place to shelter...but what is a challenge is people who continuously ride and who do use the system for shelter and that’s where we look to

engage the outreach to provide assistance to those individuals who are sheltering on the train and not using it for transportation services (CTA, 2024b).

However, Sam and Chris recalled many incidents where they have felt unwelcome on the CTA. When asked what the CTA could do to make his life easier, Chris laughed. “They don’t want us here,” he insisted. Sam recalled how he is often woken by security guards banging on the windows of the trains, and Chris claimed he is often forced to exit the train at the end of the line. The implementation of this policy is likely inconsistent, since William, another man I spoke to, stated that they used to do this but do not anymore.

Michael Lipsky has illustrated an apt framework for this dynamic. In his 1980 book *Street Level Bureaucracy: The Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, he wrote “street-level bureaucrats have considerable discretion in determining the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies” (Lipsky, 1980, pp. 13). CTA workers certainly have the ability to act in accordance with their own values when providing services to the public, and the discretion of each individual employee plays a major role in how homeless people are treated on CTA vehicles. Nate, a CTA bus driver, explained over a late-night meal at a Popeye’s outside a Blue Line station that he technically is not supposed to allow people to remain on his bus at the end of the line. However, he has been told that, as long as the riders are not causing issues, “[he is] the captain of [his] own ship”.

Nate’s compassion developed from seeing these individuals’ struggles firsthand. Jacob Wasserman, the Research Program Manager for the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, highlighted the difficult situations that transit operators are sometimes put in, saying

A lot of the operators we talk to have a really deep recognition of need. They interact with these people every day. You know, sometimes there are people that can't pay the fare, but if you ride the same bus every day, you get to know the operator... I think that a lot of operators have struggled to address homelessness because... they're not trained, they're not social workers, but they're being asked to [act like them].

Though individual operators may be sympathetic, they cannot meet the needs of their homeless riders. This highlights the need for trained outreach workers, such as those employed by Haymarket Center and The Night Ministry, to fill these gaps. However, these organizations can only provide these services with the assistance and support of the CTA as an institution.

Mary Poliwka, the Community Health Manager for The Night Ministry, believes that the CTA's priorities are mostly aligned with The Night Ministry's. She stated "Overall, our relationship with our CTA partner has been very positive...what their goal is and what our goal is are not exactly the same, but I think it's been a productive relationship to help our clients." Poliwka additionally shared positive interactions that The Night Ministry has had with CTA security guards, stating "They help us manage crowds and lines and, they don't need to do this, but they help us pack the snack bags and stuff." Ma'likqua Koleosho, the Program Supervisor for CTA Outreach at Haymarket Center, recognized the tensions between institutional policies and practices that Chris, Sam, and Nate all pointed out. She recalled witnessing negative interactions between CTA security personnel and homeless riders, saying

I understand that [security] want to make sure that the staff is safe. I think [security's] interactions with clients could be slightly more respectful...and I understand that our clients can sometimes be difficult, so I will not sit here and act like it's just a victim situation...I think since they've become more aware of our program and we've worked together more and we've talked more with the CTA, the security has progressed more, but I've experienced security yelling and cussing out clients or threatening them, and it's just like 'oh my goodness. We can do better here, because they're still human beings. They're the same as me and you'.

However, Koleosho agreed with Poliwka that

The scope of our program and the scope of what CTA expects [align]...They would like us to help move the clients around and make sure they're not just lingering in one area or participating in contraband or littering on the CTA...for Haymarket it's an expectation of matching them to shelters, matching them to housing, and trying to connect them to treatment, detox, or whatever their care plan is.

This indicates that in finding alignment with the CTA, the priorities of these homeless outreach organizations may end up slightly misaligned with the priorities of those they serve. Though providing access to shelters and treatment is beneficial, it also relies on prioritizing moving people off the CTA. Poliwka's explanation of why The Night Ministry didn't originally promote their CTA program sheds more light on this:

For a long time we did not promote it at all because the goal was to serve people who are already riding the trains as shelter, not to get people from the community necessarily coming to the train. So we just started doing outreach there, and then by word of mouth it really grew. At this point, it's so big already that we talk about it much more openly, and we have it on a services flyer, but for a long time we were a bit more careful about that because we wanted to respect the wishes of the CTA.

Though the CTA is willing to fund outreach, they seemingly have some hesitancy about the possibility of bringing more homeless riders to the CTA. This consideration is respected by the outreach organizations as well. Ultimately, Chris is aware that the CTA does not want him on the trains, and in a way perhaps the outreach workers don't either.

This is not to say that Chris has a negative relationship with the outreach workers. "Those guys are awesome" he said when asked about the outreach workers he's interacted with on the Blue Line trains. The outreach workers are still willing to differ from the CTA's goals in some instances as well. Poliwka explained her reasoning for this, saying "I think their goal overall is for folks to be in more permanent shelter so that they don't need to use the transit system as shelter. For us, we want that too, but also a lot of our services are geared towards just helping people survive, so we are doing both." At the end of the day, Koleosho and Poliwka both emphasized the importance of meeting their clients "where they are", which includes those who aren't currently interested in or capable of pursuing more formal forms of shelter. While they may suggest other options, Koleosho and Poliwka still ultimately provide support and services to people who don't move off the train.

The desire to get people off the train seems to have different motivations for the CTA and for the outreach workers. There is a business incentive to getting homeless people off the trains for the CTA. In a survey of 49 transit agencies, it was found that 73% believed that homelessness affected their ridership (Bell et. al, 2018). Corroborating this, various social media posts have criticized the homeless presence on the CTA. For example, a Reddit user wrote

And let's talk about the elephant in the room - the homelessness issue. It's not uncommon to find homeless individuals camping out on the train, taking up multiple seats, and just sleeping away. While I empathize with their plight, it's frustrating to see the impact on commuters who rely on the CTA to get around (themightykale, 2024).

The outreach workers' desire to get people off the train, in addition to wanting to further the CTA's goals, could also come from a place of care. Many people who shelter on the train don't want to be there either. When I first spoke to William, who now is staying in a shelter, I asked him if he had ever spent the night on the train, and he replied, "I have, but I hope to never do it again". He described how somebody "cut his pants" and took everything he had when he spent the night on the train. Nate recalled a conversation that he had with someone who had slept on the train and woken up with a knife to his throat and, again, all of his stuff was stolen.

Chicago's two 24-hour trains have very different, but both negative, reputations amongst those sleeping on them. William explained that the Red Line has too many fights while the Blue Line has too many overdoses. Between 2018 and 2022, there were 158 deaths on CTA property from opioid-related overdoses. A shocking 93 occurred on the Blue Line (Prout, 2024). To some, the choice between drugs and violence is impossible. When asked whether he would prefer to sleep on the Red Line or Blue Line, William immediately exclaimed "Neither one!" To some, there is a clear choice. Chris and Sam only sleep on the Blue Line, choosing the exposure to

drugs over the exposure to violence they could face on the Red Line. Chris explained how people on the Red Line will take your stuff- “or kill you” Sam chimed in.

Even if the Blue Line might have a reputation for being less violent, it was the site of a notable anti-homeless hate crime in 2024. On the morning of September 2nd, four people sleeping on the Blue Line were shot and killed by a man who seemingly attacked them purely because they were vulnerable (Liederman, 2024). This is just an extreme example of the risks homeless populations face every day on the trains. While homeless people are often blamed for crime upticks, Wasserman clarified that the homeless are “far more likely to be victims of crimes than perpetrators.” This is backed up by a study from the State of Washington Department of Commerce (2016), showing that homeless people were no more likely to commit crimes (aside from crimes relating to camping ordinances) than the general population. Additionally, a 2014 study found that of 500 individuals surveyed (from 5 cities in the U.S.) almost half had been subjected to some form of violence (Meinbresse et. al, 2014).

Beyond the risks of violence they face, Chris and Sam have both developed spinal stenosis, a condition caused by the narrowing of the spinal canal that can lead to back pain, numbness, and tingling sensations (Cleveland Clinic, 2025). Sam is confident that this condition was either caused or exacerbated by his many years sleeping on the train. “The train bangs you”, he explained. In a 2011 study of people sleeping on the bus system in Santa Clara County, CA, one interviewee expressed similar sentiments, saying “it’s really hard to sleep on the bus because it moves a lot and makes a lot of noise. I have bruises on my body and wake up with pain. A human isn’t meant to sleep on the bus, or to sleep sitting down” (Nichols and Cázares, 2011).

Given the negative reputation public transit seems to have in the eyes of the homeless community, it is surprising that anyone would choose to sleep on it. Poliwka recalled her

impressions of people who tend to sleep on public transit. “I think they tend to be in the most dire straits... they’re on the train because in many cases, they don’t have anything at all. They don’t even have a tent to sleep outside.” Wasserman referred to public transit as a “shelter of last resort.” William would agree. Matt, another man I met who was spending his first night on the street in Chicago, concurred that he had been told that the trains were not the best option and that he thought he would have better luck sleeping elsewhere.

For some, the proliferation of drugs on the Blue Line might be part of its appeal. William seemed to consider drug use to be one of the main reasons someone would stay on a train rather than elsewhere. “They don’t have anywhere else to go!” he seemed almost offended when asked why someone might choose to sleep there. “And they’re probably addicted to drugs” he added. Koleosho agreed that drugs play a large role in incentivizing people to stay on public transit. “The Blue Line [is a big] resource for obtaining drugs so someone might prefer just to stay near their source of drugs.”

Drugs also seemingly played a large role for those who chose to stop sleeping on the CTA. Isaac, another man I spoke to who no longer sleeps on the CTA but slept on the Red Line for 1.5 years, described his frustration at the number of people doing and selling drugs on the train. He lamented that this behavior inspired even more drug dealing and drug use on the trains. Despite this, Koleosho pointed out that harm-reduction was one of the most sought-after services that Haymarket Center provides, indicating the need for further investment in this area. Chris first connected with Haymarket Center because he did rehab with them. “Rehab is the main ingredient,” Sam said in reference to how people connect with these outreach organizations. Perhaps contrary to Isaac’s negative impression of those using drugs on the trains, some people want to receive support but just don’t have the resources to pursue it.

Chris and Sam both seemed to have some level of attachment to the train community. Chris noted that he sees the same people often, and that “you start to get worried about them”. Chris recalled that he has saved a few people from overdosing on the train over the years. Sam talked about how he likes to share food and bus passes with people who need them more than him. I asked Chris why he sleeps on the train instead of somewhere else, and his response was brief; “at least it’s a warm shelter.”

The weather likely also plays a role in whether homeless people choose to take their chances on the trains or pursue another form of shelter. While data about the locations of unhoused people across different cities varies in quality, Wasserman pointed out that a much larger proportion of the homeless population sleeps on trains in New York City compared to Los Angeles. Two of the reasons he proposed for this were the better connectivity of New York’s transit system and the more hospitable climate in Los Angeles. Staying outside during a Chicago winter requires cold weather gear and possibly other interventions, such as dangerous homemade heating devices. Homeless people are at risk of losing these necessary items at any given time. In February of 2025, the city removed several “smoke stack components and propane tanks” from an encampment in Gompers Park on the Northwest Side (DeVore and Boyle, 2025). The statement given by the Chicago Park District justifying this was ““These components pose extreme danger to the occupants, as well as other individuals in the area including other encampment residents, park staff, and the general public”” (DeVore and Boyle, 2025). While sleeping off of the transit system may be safer in regards to crime, other concerns could easily push people onto public transit.

Interestingly, the 2011 survey from Santa Clara, CA, in contradiction with many sentiments from my interviews, found that many women in particular chose to sleep on the bus

for safety (Nichols and Cázares, 2011). However, it is worth noting that the safety benefits described in that study are likely specific to buses. Nate highlighted that while sleeping on any form of public transit is unsafe, at least there is a bus driver right there on a bus. On the train there is only the conductor in the front car.

Still, people's conceptions of their own abilities to protect themselves on transit vary drastically. Chris and Sam both acknowledged the risk of theft while sleeping on trains but described how they try to sleep completely on top of their backpacks to make them more difficult to steal, indicating that they have adapted their behavior to deal with this issue. Isaac was (perhaps unjustifiably) confident in his abilities to defend himself as well. He stated that he no longer sleeps on the trains because he doesn't like people there, but that while he was on the train, he would scare off people engaging in behaviors he found undesirable.

Lastly, the resistance of many homeless people to going into shelters is well documented. There are many factors driving this- including but not limited to a lack of beds in shelters, strict rules, and health and safety risks (Donley and Wright, 2011). Koleosho described

Some shelters won't allow you to bring in your food that you just worked so hard to earn for that day, and then say you have food for the week. Some people make sandwiches. They will have to toss that out to come in the shelter. So they're like 'Well, I worked so hard today for food', and then they want to work tomorrow to pay for something else, but if [they] go into the shelter for the night, [they] lose all of this and have to start over tomorrow- so [they] might as well sleep on the train tonight.

Nichols and Cázares (2011) reported some of their respondents comparing shelters to being in prison. Poliwka stated; "A lot of people don't want to go to emergency shelters because they're afraid for their safety. They can't bring their partner. They can't bring their pet. They don't like how they're treated there." With all these potential concerns, it is unsurprising that some people ultimately decide the CTA is their best option.

The role that security and law enforcement should play in interacting with homeless riders is somewhat unclear. Loukaitou-Sideris et. al (2021) found, in a comparison of law-enforcement and civilian-led outreach teams in Los Angeles, that the civilian-led outreach team was better received by clients. Wasserman shared several anecdotes indicating similar outcomes in Denver. He described an outreach worker who was paired with an officer until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. After the start of the pandemic, she started doing outreach on her own and found it much easier to connect with clients. He also recalled a conversation he had had with Steve Martin, the former police chief of the Regional Transportation District (RTD) (Denver’s public transit system), who advocated strongly for civilian outreach teams, saying that police should not be performing homeless outreach because “being homeless isn’t a crime in and of itself. There are better things to be doing.”

Koleosho and Poliwka both recognized the roles that their organizations play in de-escalating situations that could lead to arrests. Koleosho noted that relationships formed with CTA attendants allowed Haymarket Center’s workers to better respond to situations that may arise. She stated “If [the CTA workers] see a client that’s there, and they know we’re on the train, they can give us a call and say ‘Hey, we have a client here. We need assistance de-escalating them before calling the police.’” Koleosho pointed out that “calling the police on a client is like the worst thing you can do because they can’t pay the ticket. They’re experiencing homelessness, and they more than likely don’t have the funds to pay for the ticket.” Poliwka sees calling the police as only a last resort. “We really try to deescalate situations before they get to that point because our community is already vulnerable, and we don’t want to call the police unless we have to.”

Poliwka noted how oftentimes a sympathetic listener is all that is needed to deescalate a situation at The Night Ministry's hubs.

It's just talking to people and trying to solve problems...and usually that's all people need. Someone may have had a really bad day because they haven't had a bottle of water the entire day or they haven't eaten anything all day or maybe someone stole their belongings...and then they're having to wait in this long line and they're starving, and you know sometimes it just takes a simple question of 'what's going on? How can we help?' and then if we can address that thing in the moment, then it'll calm things down really easily.

William thought the CTA should invest more in security. He expressed that there was too much trouble on the trains and that he thought security would help cut down on crime and the people playing loud music that woke him up on the trains. Isaac spoke almost gleefully about the time a CTA conductor had threatened to call the police on a man selling weed on the Orange Line. However, Isaac also complained about the negative responses he got from security personnel when practicing his martial arts in public.

Homeless riders are put in a difficult position where they are both often hassled by security but also dependent on them for protection from crime and other behaviors that disrupt their sleep. William and Isaac had strong convictions about which behaviors should be allowed and which should not, while Sam and Chris had a more cynical view of the potential of security. They rely on themselves to protect their belongings and as such still consider the train their best option. Given their higher expectations for security, it makes sense that William and Isaac would both choose to leave the train. As of now, the police and security personnel clearly are not going to enforce the law in the way they would like.

A group of researchers (including Jacob Wasserman) from the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies classified different transit agencies' interventions for the homeless into

four categories: ‘Hub of Services’, ‘Mobile Outreach’, ‘Discounted Fares’, and ‘Transportation to Shelters’ (Loukaitou-Sideris et. al, 2022). A notable example is The Hub of Hope in Philadelphia which was featured in a *New York Times* article in 2022 (Gold and Woo, 2022). This is a successful implementation of the ‘Hub of Services’ model. It is open daily in a centrally located station in Philadelphia and provides services such as laundry, showers, and food. They additionally offer a ‘living room’ for clients to spend time in and provide them transportation to shelters from the hub (Project HOME, 2024).

The Night Ministry operates a smaller-scale version of the ‘Hub of Services’ model, while Haymarket Center and Thresholds fit into the ‘Mobile Outreach’ category. Wasserman has studied the homeless outreach programs of transit agencies across the U.S., so I asked him what type of outreach model he thought was best. He said

I think that the hub model in Philadelphia works very well from what I've seen, but it also works best on a system where there's a central area. I mean, I imagine the loop of Chicago would be like that. But in a transit system that's more spread out, [that] maybe doesn't have a central depot, maybe mobile outreach or some combination of both [would be] best.

Wasserman went on to explain that any kind of attempt from a transit agency to provide support would be beneficial. Chicago implements a combination of the ‘Hub of Services’ and ‘Mobile Outreach’ approaches well. The presence of both seems necessary. Poliwka, explaining her rationale for the hub model, stated

Originally, we were walking the train, but it's really hard to do more intensive services with someone in the train itself. In terms of medical care, in terms of case management there's no privacy. So being outside the train but within the turnstile in the open platform area we were able to set up stations for everything.

Positioning the hubs at the end of train lines also provides an advantage. Poliwka stated

Originally, it was kind of portrayed that people at the end of the line might be taken off the train and then to have to go on the other side of the line and get back on. So then it

was thought if we were set up inside the turnstile then as people were moving between trains, we would catch them all.

Koleosho, explaining the benefits of being on the train, stated “since we're always moving around, we can see at different stations, the traffic, basically. So Forest Park sees a different amount of clients than O'Hare, and then Clark and Lake is a hot spot.” This allows her to assess needs across the city and address potential issues on all parts of the CTA.

The two different approaches allow the organizations to cover a wider array of services for the community. Koleosho noted how Haymarket Center’s CTA outreach workers keep in contact with other branches of their homeless outreach programming. This allows them to adapt to the needs of people who are always moving around, even those moving on and off transit. Poliwka described The Night Ministry’s collaborations with Shower Up, a group that has a shower bus, and Loyola University’s medical school, which offers medical care to clients. These services would not be possible on the train. However, Haymarket Center’s outreach consistently provides day-to-day essentials with their daily outreach. Ultimately, it seems, at least in the case of Chicago, having a diverse array of methods for homeless outreach allows a larger population to be served and for people’s needs to be met more consistently.

Each person’s decision about where to sleep draws on different values of community, safety, support networks, and the other options available to each individual. However, Koleosho believes that the prevalence of homelessness on public transit highlights failures in housing policy around Chicago, explaining “People would rather sleep on a train than sleep in a shelter where it’s warm and actually slightly safer than being on public transit at night.” Wasserman, while paraphrasing the former head of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation Selena

Reynolds, stated that “transportation has to bear the burden of...failures in other social realms.”

Koleosho shared

My solution for an alternative for the trains would be low-barrier shelters...and housing, a lot more housing, affordable housing in the City of Chicago, because most of our clients have income, which might shock you, but most of our clients have income whether its SSI, SSDI, or a job. Most of them have jobs and they make minimum wage in Chicago. The affordable housing is so hard to find so they end up just sleeping on a train until they can...save some money.

Low-barrier shelters have gained more traction in recent years. They remove many of the restrictions discussed earlier that often deter homeless people. A recent analysis of a low-barrier shelter that centered harm-reduction practices found that participants tended to be much happier there and often reduced the frequency of their drug use (Beaugard et. al, 2024). Additionally, a 2025 study, in response to assertions that low-barrier shelters increase crime in surrounding areas, found that they do not significantly impact either arrests or calls for law enforcement (Wilking et. al, 2025). It seems Koleosho and Poliwka’s philosophy of meeting people where they are at could be applied to shelters, too.

Though this project only covers the perspectives of a small number of individuals, some common themes point to important conclusions about how the CTA addresses homeless riders. It is essential that there is more consistency between how the CTA would like homeless riders to be treated and how they are actually treated. While sympathetic individuals like Nate can make a positive impact on some people’s lives, the inconsistency in individual employees’ responses presents a danger to homeless riders. The CTA needs to ensure that homeless riders are not mistreated by security personnel and ideally are not woken up for no reason at the end of the line. People are going to sleep on the trains regardless of these interactions, so needlessly harassing them achieves nothing while putting the homeless riders at risk of further sleep deprivation or an escalated interaction.

The CTA's emphasis on getting homeless people off the train likely contributes to these instances of harassment. A friend of mine recently described how while riding the Red Line she witnessed a security guard enter the train car and force a man who was sleeping on the seats to leave the train in the middle of the route. The only instance in which it is productive to prioritize getting people off the trains is when the homeless person's willingness to get off the train comes from improvements and support in their personal lives, such as is provided by Haymarket Center and The Night Ministry. Otherwise, they will just continue to suffer elsewhere in public. While the CTA clearly does want to provide this support, their employees' fixation on the end goal of getting people off the trains leads to harmful interactions like the one described above.

It is also essential that the CTA continue to fund these programs to the best of their abilities. Unfortunately, recent cuts to federal grants for public health services threaten these organizations. In an interview from March of this year, a representative from Haymarket Center stated that they could lose up to a quarter of their funding (Liederman, 2025). With already scarce resources, cuts like this could gut these essential programs and lead to worse outcomes for homeless people around the city. Public transit outreach addresses issues of equity, public health, and public safety among many other things, and it is essential that these programs are able to continue.

Ultimately, a transit agency is not in a position to solve the homelessness crisis, but through thoughtless and punitive policies it could easily make it worse. Investments in helping people make the best of their own situations are much more likely to ultimately have a positive impact. Clearly, the homeless have an incredibly diverse array of needs and beliefs surrounding drug use, law enforcement and many other areas. Some of them may even be employed and still unable to afford shelter. Imposing blanket restrictions on these people cannot possibly work.

However, spending time talking to people, finding out what they need, and addressing their issues as Haymarket Center and The Night Ministry do can help reduce the suffering of these people and ultimately make the CTA a more welcoming place for everyone whether someone needs to use it for shelter or for a commute.

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