



SEPTA and Drexel Team up to Battle COVID-19

PHILADELPHIA (December 15, 2020) – Researchers from Drexel University will be working with the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) to enhance efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on public transportation. Through a recently formed partnership, the institutions are pursuing a federal grant for research into risk assessment, mitigation and communication strategies that will help keep riders safe and healthy.

“The health and safety of our customers and employees is our top priority as we work through the COVID-19 pandemic,” said SEPTA General Manager Leslie S. Richards. “SEPTA is extremely fortunate to have a neighbor and partner like Drexel University, and access to their world-renowned research and expertise. This partnership will help keep SEPTA on the cutting-edge of efforts by public transportation systems to battle COVID-19.”

Since the onset of the pandemic, teams of researchers from across Drexel’s campus have led the way in educating the public about COVID-19, studying its transmission and developing techniques to prevent its spread. The partnership allows SEPTA to tap into this wealth of knowledge as it continues to adjust operations.

“Like many public transit agencies and transportation hubs, SEPTA has already made significant changes to protect the health of their riders – from encouraging masking and social distancing to enhancing cleaning and ventilation,” said Aleister Saunders, PhD, senior vice provost for research at Drexel. “But evaluating these safety measures and reporting on their effectiveness will be important for assuring riders that they can safely travel on mass transit. Drexel has the breadth of expertise to support SEPTA in these efforts. We are excited to partner with SEPTA on these efforts.”

SEPTA's efforts to fight COVID-19 began in early 2020 with the implementation of a robust cleaning and disinfecting program for all vehicles and stations. Signage and decals encouraging social distancing have been installed in all customer areas and employee facilities, and there are capacity limits on vehicles. In addition, the vast majority of riders have been on-board with SEPTA's mask requirement. Recent audits show over 90 percent compliance.

"Studies during the pandemic have shown that public transportation is safe, and there have been no direct links between riding SEPTA and contracting the coronavirus," SEPTA General Manager Richards said. "By partnering with Drexel, SEPTA will be positioned to continue to adapt and add measures to improve the safety of customers and employees."

The partnership will focus on understanding the role of masks, ventilation, air treatment and surface cleaning in preventing transmission of the virus, developing strategies that SEPTA can deploy in the near future and guiding the agency in communicating these new safety protocols. It will draw on the expertise of faculty from Drexel's College of Engineering, College of Medicine, College of Nursing and Health Professions and the Dornsife School of Public Health.

Among these researchers are experts who were tapped to guide Philadelphia's response efforts, who successfully pushed the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to recognize airborne spread of the virus, and who developed and tested technology designed to limit its transmission. They have also played an important role in informing the public about the severity of the virus, offering health and safety guidance and drawing attention to populations that are particularly vulnerable during the pandemic.

Research teams from SEPTA and Drexel will immediately begin testing current safety procedures and pursue federal funding to develop and test new air and surface cleaning technology.

"This is just one of many ways that the pandemic has revealed the strength of our community during times of crisis." said Christopher Sales, PhD, an associate professor of environmental engineering at Drexel who is leading this collaboration with James Fox, SEPTA's Assistant General Manager for System Safety. "And while the efforts of this partnership will certainly be important for regaining the trust and confidence of rider to return safely to commuting on Philadelphia's public transit system, our findings could also help to guide the policies of similar systems across the country."

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