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M.T.A. Station Agent Cuts Leave Riders Lost

By [MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM](#)

Afzal Hossain is the New York City subway's newest customer assistant, and he is not happy about it.

After nearly 300 station agents were removed from the system late last month because of hard fiscal times, the task of guiding passengers and monitoring late-night riders has fallen to unsuspecting Samaritans like Mr. Hossain, a snack vendor in the Times Square station.

With a nearby booth now unattended, Mr. Hossain's day has become filled with questions from lost tourists, anxious riders and pleading, sometimes screaming requests from stroller-pushing straphangers trying to open a service gate.

"It's all day long," Mr. Hossain said wearily, peering at the darkened booth just beyond the turnstiles. (In five minutes, he was accosted by three confused riders.) "When I get a chance, I tell them go this way, go that way. But sometimes, I'm serving a customer so I don't say anything."

Subway station agents, once mandatory for selling tokens, have traveled a slow road toward obsolescence. Booth closings began earlier this decade, after transit officials decided they were an antiquated antecedent to MetroCards and their colorful kiosks.

But riders said they liked having the agents around, particularly at night as a deterrent against crime. A compromise plan in 2005 reoriented the job toward customer service, placing some clerks outside the booths to better assist riders. Now that program is being wiped out.

In all, nearly 800 more agents will be reassigned in the next several years; those who retire will not be replaced.

Transit officials say the changes will not make the system more dangerous. At least one entrance at every

station retains a 24-hour staffed booth, and customers at an unattended entrance can use intercoms to reach the agent on duty. Security cameras monitor many subway platforms and entrances, and crime has fallen significantly.

But at Times Square, the system's busiest station, passengers who enter near Mr. Hossain's shop are two blocks (and several staircases) from the nearest staffed booth. At smaller stations, the nearest agent can be on the wrong side of four uncrossable subway tracks.

At the 110th Street station on the No. 1 line, no agent remains on the uptown platform.

"It's really irresponsible; it doesn't make sense to me," said Noni Valhackett, 20, a Brooklyn resident, as she waited for a friend in the station around 10 p.m. on Tuesday.

"A young woman in New York shouldn't have to be somewhere late at night where there's no one around," Ms. Valhackett said.

Beneath the Port Authority Bus Terminal on Tuesday, some riders struggled to navigate the nuances of the system. David Rainbird, 41, a Catskills resident on the way to London, could not carry his suitcase through the turnstiles, but there was no agent around to open the service gate. He ended up getting help from a [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) equipment repairman who happened to be nearby.

"If I didn't speak English, I would have been completely stuck," a relieved Mr. Rainbird said afterward. "I might as well be on the Tokyo subway."

The repairman, who was scraping the underside of a [MetroCard](#) reader, said he had been fielding questions for hours. "It bothers me, because I have to keep up with my work," he said. (He would not give his name, saying he was not authorized to speak with reporters.)

Matt Freemantle, an English tourist on a gap year before starting at University College London, waited five minutes to get directions from a clerk in a booth. He said he preferred the London subway, where agents often interact with customers with no partition between them.

“It’s more clear; it’s easier to speak to them,” he said, adding that the New York clerk’s directions were garbled. “They can point out exactly where to go.”

The new chairman of the transportation authority, [Jay H. Walder](#), who helped run London’s system for six years, said the changing role of station agents was emblematic of changing technology in the transit world. London’s use of computerized fare cards allows for fewer agents with more flexibility in their role, he said.

Mr. Walder noted that New York’s agents were never intended to be security guards, and that the system is much safer than it used to be. In an emergency, agents are instructed to call for help, not to interfere.

“The board had to make some very tough decisions to be able to deal with a tough financial circumstance,” Mr. Walder said in an interview on Thursday. “We will continue to have a presence in every station. We have a Police Department that is doing a fabulous job on crime. I think it was an appropriate decision.”

This year’s reduction in agents saved \$5.7 million, according to [New York City Transit](#).

Still, critics of the change insist that the clerks provide a reassuring presence for riders. “I just don’t think the authority has an appreciation for the convenience of its customers,” said [Gene Russianoff](#), a staff lawyer for the [Straphangers Campaign](#), a riders’ advocacy group.

Others cited the recent arrest of a terrorism suspect in Denver, who was accused of trying to construct the same type of explosives used in the 2005 transit bombings in London.

“It’s imperative that we have as many eyes and ears as possible,” said Norman Seabrook, an authority board member and chairman of its safety and security committee.

Still, some riders shrugged off the changes and said they barely noticed that the clerks had disappeared.

“I’ve never actually talked to them or anything, so it doesn’t bother me,” said Alex Shiozaki, a Juilliard student, who was waiting for the uptown local train at 110th Street. “There are other people taking it at the same time, so it’s safe.”

“I’m a law-abiding citizen,” said [David Williams](#) of Upper Manhattan, sitting a few feet down the platform. “It

doesn't bother me.”

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