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## Stricter Transit Standards to Be Sought

By [RACHEL L. SWARNS](#)

WASHINGTON — Citing an increase in the number of subway and light-rail crashes and resulting passenger injuries, the Obama administration will push for legislation that would allow the federal government to set and enforce safety standards on the nation's transit systems, officials said on Sunday.

The federal Department of Transportation currently enforces safety regulations for airlines and [Amtrak](#), but it lacks the authority to do so for subways and light-rail systems, even though the department helps finance those operations.

Oversight for those transit systems has been handled instead by state-regional bodies that often function without adequate staffing or financing, officials and safety experts said. Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) plans to present the plan to Congress next month, a department official said.

"Safety is our No. 1 priority when it comes to planes, trains and automobiles," Mr. LaHood said in a statement on Sunday. "It only makes sense that we should be looking out for passengers who ride subways, too."

Transportation officials said they were concerned about the growing number of crashes and derailments, including a deadly wreck in June that killed nine people who were riding the regional transit system that serves Washington and its suburbs.

From 2003 to 2008, the national rate of passenger injuries on subways and light-rail crashes increased to 1.362 injuries per 100 million miles from 0.483, a 182 percent increase, transportation officials said. The Obama administration's plans were first reported Sunday in The Washington Post.

Robert T. Francis, a former vice chairman of the [National Transportation Safety Board](#), praised the proposal.

The board investigates transit crashes and issues safety recommendations. But under current law, the federal government cannot require subway systems to follow them.

“They’re helping to finance all of these systems; they should take some type of role to make sure that passengers are being carried safely,” Mr. Francis said of the federal transportation department. “It’s inexcusable, I think, not to have some kind of reasonable safety oversight of big transportation systems like this.”

Currently, 27 state safety agencies hold the responsibility for keeping transit systems safe, but the quality of those agencies varies widely, transportation officials said.

Some rely on the very transit systems they are supposed to oversee for financing and lack the authority to enforce their rules. As for staffing, the state safety agencies average less than one full-time staff person per agency, the officials said.

Under the administration’s plan, states would be allowed to maintain oversight of their transit systems as long as they could demonstrate that they have enough fully-trained staff members to enforce federal safety rules, the authority to compel compliance from the transit system and enough financial independence from the systems they are regulating, officials said.

The federal government would also cover the costs of salaries and benefits for state employees overseeing standards. In states that are unable to provide adequate oversight, the federal government would assume that role.

A spokesman for Representative [James L. Oberstar](#), the Minnesota Democrat who is the chairman of the House Transportation Committee, said it was too early to assess the plan. “Until we get more details from the administration, we’re really not in a position to comment,” the spokesman, Jim Berard, said.

Representative John L. Mica of Florida, the senior Republican on the committee, said he would prefer to see tougher state regulations and more federal financing to help states enforce them. He noted that transit systems vary enormously in size and operations and he questioned whether a single federal agency could or should supervise all of them.

“I’m certain there’s room for improvement, but I would be very hesitant about the federal government or F.T.A. becoming the transit enforcement agency,” said Mr. Mica, referring to the Federal Transit Administration, which currently provides financing to transit systems.

But Representative [Jerrold Nadler](#), Democrat of New York, said the plan would help ensure that periodic state and city budget cuts did not threaten safety.

“There’s always pressure to cut wherever you can,” said Mr. Nadler, who also sits on the House Transportation Committee. “It’s good to have an outside agency or monitor to make sure you don’t cut safety.”

Officials at the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#), which runs New York City’s subway system, said they had not yet reviewed the details of the proposal and could not comment on how it might impact the system.

It was also unclear on Sunday how any new federal rules would be reconciled with those at New York’s Public Transportation Safety Board, the state-level agency that already oversees the city’s subways. (The nation’s commuter railroads, including Metro-North and the [Long Island Rail Road](#), already fall under federal safety guidelines.)

Elisa Nichols, a transit safety consultant who worked as a security auditor for the American Public Transportation Association, an industry group, said it would be difficult to find and hire large numbers of experts who are both familiar with federal law and the intricacies of individual transit systems.

“This is a great idea,” she said, “but implementation is going to be extremely difficult.”

*Michael M. Grynbaum contributed reporting from New York.*

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