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April 10, 2016

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Community Service Society, Riders Alliance Launch “Fair Fares” Campaign for Reduced-Fare MetroCards for Lowest-Income New Yorkers

*New report finds 1 in 4 low-income New Yorkers can’t afford MetroCards; an
estimated 800,000 riders would be eligible for a half-price fare for lowest-income
New Yorkers, saving those who opt to participate up to \$700 per year*

New York, NY — On the heels of a new report showing that 1 in 4 low-income New Yorkers cannot afford to use public transportation, prominent local advocates Community Service Society and Riders Alliance announced a new campaign today to win “Fair Fares,” a campaign for reduced-fare MetroCards that would be available to the city’s working poor.

Today’s rally comes as Community Service Society of New York (CSS), a research and advocacy organization that works to spur upward mobility for low-income New Yorkers, releases a new report, “The Transit Affordability Crisis.” The report finds that over a quarter of low-income New Yorkers were often unable to afford the subway or bus in the past year, limiting many New Yorkers’ opportunities to get good jobs and affordable housing and, in many cases, forcing them to choose between transit and other necessities. CSS’s most recent citywide survey, the Unheard Third, found that the consequences were especially severe for low-income working age blacks and Latinos, with 31 percent of African-Americans and 43 percent of Latinos reporting that the cost of MTA fares kept them from looking for or taking a job further from the neighborhoods where they live.

At Sunday’s rally, CSS and members of the Riders Alliance, a grassroots membership organization of subway and bus riders, announced the release of the study and called for Mayor Bill de Blasio and the City Council to establish a program that would allow riders below the federal poverty level to purchase half-fare MetroCards.

The new study, “The Transit Affordability Crisis,” principally authored by CSS Senior Labor Economist Harold Stolper, uses data collected through CSS’s scientific survey to document the heavy burden that transit fares place on the already strained budgets of low-income New Yorkers, and the consequences of this burden on their daily lives. The report complements this data-driven analysis with low-income riders’ own stories of hardship to demonstrate that the high—and increasing—cost of a MetroCard makes public transportation inaccessible to New York’s neediest riders. According to the study, low-income riders are the most “transit dependent” of any New York population, with fully 58 percent

relying on the subway or bus. For these individuals, the cost of a MetroCard makes up 10 percent of their budget, forcing many riders to make tough choices between transit and other necessities, limiting their access to economic opportunity.

“The Transit Affordability Crisis” describes how other large cities—including Seattle, San Francisco, and London— have eased the burden on low-income families through fare discount programs, and introduces a similar fare discount proposal for low-income subway and bus riders on the MTA.

A half-fare discount program targeted to poor New Yorkers would save those who take advantage of it as much as \$700 a year off the cost of 12 monthly passes. An estimated 800,000 adults would be eligible for the reduced fares. The number of eligible individuals who ultimately participate in the program will depend heavily on how the program is designed and implemented, but assuming a take-up rate among regular subway and bus users comparable to that for benefits like food stamps, the study estimates that 361,000 riders would participate at a cost of roughly \$194 million a year in foregone farebox revenue. Several possible sources of additional revenue for the MTA are suggested to offset lost revenue in order to avoid the need to raise fares for other riders to cover the cost of the discounts.

“Economic mobility and transit affordability go hand in hand. To get to work, pick up your kids from school, go to the doctor, to do almost everything you need to do in New York City to survive requires riding the subway or bus,” said **David R. Jones, President and CEO of the Community Service Society**. “Yet one-quarter of the city’s working poor often cannot afford bus and subway fare. The MTA should be available to everyone in our city, not just those with credit cards in their pocket who can afford a monthly pass, but to those with a few bucks in their pockets who are struggling to take care of their families and get ahead.”

Low-income transit riders’ life experiences back up the report’s key findings. **Leslie Wells, a 44-year old substitute teacher and Riders Alliance member from Central Harlem, said,** “I can barely afford to make ends meet to support my 14 year old son. The rising cost of a MetroCard is a big chunk of my salary. When I don’t have the money for the fare, I just don’t go to work. The hidden message is that the working poor should not be living in New York City.”

Importantly, the report demonstrates that low-income New Yorkers are left out of programs that already provide many New Yorkers with substantial fare relief: half-priced discounts on MetroCards are already available to seniors and persons with disabilities, in addition to pre-tax transit benefits that save middle-class New Yorkers hundreds of dollars on their MetroCards. And the fare structure itself offers the deepest discounts to more affluent riders who can afford to lay out money for a monthly unlimited pass. “Sometimes I have to decide either to buy a MetroCard or spend on food or rent,” said **Riders Alliance member Manny Aguilar, a 49-year-old immigrant from Queens**. “It’s not an easy choice, and I’m not the only one making it: lots of people in the neighborhood are getting arrested for hopping the turnstile. We need a program like this.”

At today’s rally, riders announced the launch of a petition calling on Mayor de Blasio and the City Council to support a “Fair Fare” for low-income New Yorkers. In addition to CSS and Riders Alliance, Public Advocate Letitia James and Comptroller Scott Stringer as well as numerous advocacy groups expressed support for Fair Fares, including the Bronx Defenders, Brooklyn Defender Services, the

Brooklyn Movement Center, Community Action for Safe Apartments (CASA), Community Voices Heard, Fifth Avenue Committee, Make the Road NY, the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, Pratt Center, The Police Reform Organizing Project, Transportation Alternatives, Transport Workers Union Local 100, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, and VOCAL-NY. Riders can sign the petition and share their stories at www.cssny.org/transit4all or www.ridersny.org/fairfares.

"This city relies on public transportation, and yet too often New Yorkers are forced to choose between going to work putting food on the table," said **Public Advocate Letitia James**. "I thank Community Service Society and Riders Alliance for drawing attention to this important issue. We must work together to ensure that every New Yorker has the ability to move around our City."

"As subway and bus fares continue to rise, far too many New Yorkers are left to choose between paying the rent and buying a MetroCard," said **New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer**. "Half-priced fares for low-income families will put up to \$700 a year directly in the pockets of New Yorkers who need it the most. I applaud Community Service Society and Riders Alliance for their leadership and urge MTA to join transit agencies from Seattle, San Francisco, and elsewhere in expanding their half-price MetroCard program."

"Transportation costs dramatically affect our clients' lives, from those who cannot pay to get on a subway and end up getting arrested for jumping a turnstile, to those who have to choose between feeding their children and paying the fares to get to court. This is what life is like for many Bronx residents. We should ensure that millions of low-income New Yorkers are not forced to make these impossible choices," said **Karume James, Lead Organizer and Attorney at the Bronx Defenders**.

"Every year, thousands of our clients—all of whom are, by definition, indigent—are arrested for fare evasion and face direct and collateral punishment at significant costs to the individuals involved, their communities, and our city as a whole. The vast majority of people arrested for this offense are Black and/or Latino. Many are detained on Rikers Island at a cost of about \$500 per day simply because they might not be able to afford a \$2.75 subway fare. People can lose their children and jobs, and even be deported for this crime of poverty. The answer is simple: Reinvest the funds spent on enforcement and punishment in making public transit affordable for all New Yorkers," said **Lisa Schreibersdorf, Executive Director of Brooklyn Defender Services**, a comprehensive public defense organization serving 40,000 clients in Brooklyn every year.

"The Brooklyn Movement Center is fighting for a Central Brooklyn in which long time residents can survive the onslaught of gentrification. Reduced fares should be a part of our city's anti-displacement strategy," said **Mark Winston Griffith, Executive Director of the Brooklyn Movement Center**.

"Affordable transportation helps to make New York City affordable and helps to keep lower-income New Yorkers in their homes and communities," said **Community Actions for Safe Apartments (CASA) Leader Fitzroy Christian**.

"It is very important to have reduced fares for MTA for low-income people because people can't afford to ride the train. Low-income people just can't afford it. It would help people to live in the city because they would be better able to go to work, doctor's and do whatever they need to do," said **Ketny Jean-Francois, Community Voices Heard leader** and resident of Linden Houses in Brooklyn.

"Improving the transit mobility of low-income New Yorkers will boost their access to opportunities for upward economic mobility. Making mass transit more affordable for struggling residents will also yield dividends for the entire city in the future," said **James Parrott, PHD, Deputy Director and Chief Economist of the Fiscal Policy Institute.**

"It is profoundly unjust that working New Yorkers like myself end up paying more for public transportation because we live pay check to pay check and can't spend \$110 on a monthly pass. I fought to raise the minimum wage, but will still struggle to make ends meet if we don't control metro costs," said **Amador Rivas, a member of Make the Road New York.**

"Farebeating arrests are now the highest number of arrests by the NYPD -- over 29,000 in 2015, 92% involving people of color. Most people jump the turnstile not for the thrill of it, but because the \$5.50 cost of a round trip is a financial burden for them. These arrests are, in effect, one of the principal ways that the city & the NYPD criminalize low-income New Yorkers of color," said **Robert Gangi, Director of the Police Reform Organizing Project.**

"No one should have to choose between paying rent, buying food, and being able to get to work. Right now, far too many New Yorkers are trying to make those impossible choices. A healthy city is a just and inclusive city, and an extensive transit system means little if it cannot serve the people who need it the most. Creating a discount system that provides greater transit access for our lowest income neighbors is a critical step toward transportation justice," said **Elena Conte, Director of Policy at Pratt Center for Community Development.**

"Affordable housing for New York City? Of course, it's essential. Affordable health care? Yes, indeed. Access to healthy foods at a reasonable price? Good jobs? Great open space? Yes, yes. But without decent, reliable and affordable public transit, you simply can't get from here to there, to all those things that make it possible to live and thrive in New York City," said **Cate Contino Cowit, an organizer with the Straphangers Campaign.**

"Keeping bus and subway fares affordable means more than fighting unjust fare hikes and reduced government support for transit. It's about ensuring access to opportunity for the most economically distressed New Yorkers is not contingent on the cost of a MetroCard swipe. We hope such a proposal can be examined for those commuter rail users for whom a distance-based fare consumes a disproportionate share of their household income, as well," said **Veronica Vanterpool, Executive Director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign.**

"The Transit Workers Union understands how difficult it is for many low-wage workers to pay for their daily commutes, and the need for public transit to be affordable to all workers. We stand with CSS and their partners to make public transit more affordable for low-wage New Yorkers as well as a way to end economic inequality in the city," said **Marvin Holland, Political & Legislative Director, TWU Local 100.**

"Nearly half of our city is living in or near poverty," said **Wayne Starks, VOCAL-NY board member and a formerly homeless, HIV+ New Yorker living in supportive housing**. "For us, the high cost of a MetroCard can lead to an arrest for jumping a turnstile, missing an important doctors appointment, or missing a job interview."

"I believe all New Yorkers should have accessible and affordable transit options that maximize their ability to go to work, school, and recreational venues throughout the city. A reduced fare card for low-income NYERS will increase their ability to access the regional transit system. This will ensure all low-income transit riders have access to an affordable, viable transit option," said **Louis Bailey, Community Organizer & Outreach Coordinator for WE ACT For Environmental Justice**.

Key findings from "The Transit Affordability Crisis":

❖ **Low Income Riders can't afford their MetroCard even though they rely heavily on public transportation:**

- 58% of low-income New Yorkers rely on subways and buses to get around the city
- Transit expenses for New York's more than **300,000 working poor** often exceed **10 percent of their annual budget**.
- **One out of four low-income working-age New Yorkers** reported that they were often unable to afford a MetroCard, and one of three said that this kept them from looking for or taking a job further from where they live.
- **Among low-income New Yorkers, Latinos are more than 5 times as likely as whites** to report that the transit fare prevented them from carrying out important responsibilities.

❖ **Populations that already receive discounts on the subway or bus:**

- Seniors (65+), people with disabilities, and students under 18 are already eligible for discounted MetroCards.
- Many middle-class New Yorkers who fall under the Commuter Benefits law that went into effect in January of 2016 can purchase MetroCards using pre-tax earnings.

❖ **The proposal for "Fair Fares" for low-income New Yorkers:**

- NYC residents who are between the ages of 18 and 64 with incomes at or below the federal poverty level would be eligible for half-price fares on MTA buses and subways
- A half-price fare would save eligible riders as much as \$700 annually—this is half the cost of a year's worth of 30-day unlimited MetroCards.
- Assuming a take-up rate among regular subway and bus users comparable to that for benefits like food stamps, we estimate that 361,000 riders would participate at a cost of roughly \$194 million per year in forgone farebox revenue.
- Extending the eligibility threshold up to 130% of the federal poverty level—the same income criteria used by HRA to determine eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—would raise the number of newly eligible individuals to 1.08 million, at a cost of roughly \$265 million per year.

New York and State funding sources could be used to cover the cost of a discount program.

Costs may be offset by \$48 million that HRA is already spending to fund MetroCards for

low-income individuals who participate in job training or educational programs, and for qualified trips for medical appointments covered by Medicaid.

For more information go to <http://www.cssny.org/transitcrisis>

For more than 170 years, the [Community Service Society of New York](#) has been the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers and continues to advocate for the economic security of the working poor in the nation's largest city. We respond to urgent, contemporary challenges with applied research, advocacy, litigation, and innovative program models that help the working poor achieve a better quality of life and promote a more prosperous city.

The Riders Alliance is a grassroots organization of subway and bus riders, pushing for better service at affordable fares and a stronger public investment in mass transit. Visit us at ridersny.org

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