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# THE BRONX HEALTH LINK, INC.

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**STATEMENT OF JOANN CASADO  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
THE BRONX HEALTH LINK, INC.**

**Hearings by the Metropolitan Transit Authority  
On Proposed Rate Increases  
March 2010**

The Bronx Health Link, Inc. is a clearinghouse of information for members of the health and human service delivery system of the Bronx. We reach thousands of community members, agencies and others through our workgroups, advisory boards, task forces, community based workshops, e-newsletter, conferences and forums held throughout the year to inform, educate and organize around issues of importance in the field of health care. We work extensively with the community and health care providers to improve birth outcomes, prenatal care and the reproductive health of Bronx women. A major focus of our work is to educate women about the importance of prenatal and postpartum medical screening and care, as well as self-care and care of their infants – to empower women to make informed choices.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this crucial issue of the proposed transit fare hikes.

On behalf of the hundreds of clients whom we serve each year and the hundreds of thousands of Bronx residents who are underserved by the health care system, we want to state our strong opposition to the proposed elimination of student discount fares and drastic cuts in bus service. Ending the free and half-price transit fares for students will have a particularly severe impact on the Bronx, where the Census reports that 27% of the residents overall and 38% of the children live below the federal poverty line. If this measure is implemented, many Bronx parents of public school students -- already hard-pressed by high unemployment -- will face painful choices between spending their limited funds on food, medical care, and other necessities.

Furthermore, this new expense for low-income parents will undermine their children's ability to access medical care. The 2008 report of the Health and Hospital Corporation's Primary Care Initiative Workgroup, for which The Bronx Health Link conducted consumer surveys in the South Bronx, found that large numbers of the city's poor residents are forced to travel outside their neighborhoods to find mental and dental health services. The results of focus groups summarized in the report found that inability to afford transportation was a barrier to primary care access for such populations as domestic workers, and survivors of domestic violence. For example, the report on the

domestic worker focus group stated: “Participants explained that they were aware of a few facilities where they could receive free care outside of their neighborhood, but they were unable to go there for services because they could not afford to pay for transportation.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the damage that fare hikes will do to poor parents’ efforts to obtain health care is the harm to the many health and human service agencies who serve them with all too meager budgets. The Bronx Health Link is one of many agencies that regularly offer free Metro Cards – primarily one- or two-ride cards – to clients so they can afford to travel to receive services – in our case for workshops on such issues as healthy pregnancy, smoking cessation, nutrition, and breastfeeding. The above-cited Primary Care Initiative report noted that its focus group of parents of children with mental illness found: “Some participants stated that they are willing to travel outside of their community for care if it meets the needs of their families. It was noted that some clinics provide patients with metro cards as an incentive for their continued use of the facility. MetroCards are provided by these clinics because many of their patients cited transportation as being an issue getting to the clinic.”<sup>2</sup>

According to the HIV/AIDS organization Housing Works, the MTA has reported that it provides \$4 million a month to “non-selling” entities such as hospitals, city agencies, and social service providers. Therefore, eliminating the free student fare cards, and thus requiring agencies that serve them to allocate part of their transportation subsidy budgets to purchasing such cards, will reduce the number of residents who can be provided with free Metro Cards. This is especially so at a time of severe budget cuts from state, city, and private sources, which are already putting great pressure on those agencies to cut their budgets for transportation assistance. The result will be a dramatic reduction in the ability of poor people to obtain such important health education, as well as to obtain life-extending medical, dental and mental health services. This denial of equal access is inhumane; it will also expand costs to the government down the line, as more people who have been forced to delay medical care will end up accessing expensive emergency room care.

In sum, we call for the rejection of the proposed transit service cutbacks and elimination of student discounts. Furthermore, we urge the MTA to institute a discount program for bulk purchases of MetroCards by nonprofit agencies, which will allow them to extend their limited allocations for transportation to serve more clients in need.

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<sup>1</sup> Primary Care Initiative Working Group. *Primary Care Initiative Community Health Assessment: Final Report, August 21, 2008*, p. 81. Available at [www.council.nyc.gov/downloads/pdf/PCI%20Final%20Report.pdf](http://www.council.nyc.gov/downloads/pdf/PCI%20Final%20Report.pdf) - 2008-09-22. Accessed February 4, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Primary Care Initiative*, p. 137.