Good morning/afternoon. My name is Kwacey Coggins, I am a student at Queens College, a member of the NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign and an essential worker. Thank you for inviting me to testify. Today I will be sharing my experiences as an essential worker and a bus rider this year.

During the pandemic, I have worked as an essential employee at a large retail store in several locations across Queens and Long Island. I’ve been dependent on many different bus routes – the Q44, Q20A and B, Q42, Q83, as well as the E train, and the LIRR to Long Island – to get me to and from work as safely and timely as possible.

I am speaking today on behalf of essential workers across the city because we deserve better service regardless — but especially now. Essential workers are the people who have kept New York City going during this difficult time. In New York, over 840,000 essential workers typically depend on transit for their commutes. I have regularly taken the Q44 every day with local hospital staff, on an overcrowded bus.

Working during the pandemic has been stressful and scary, but what made the experience worse was bus service I could not depend on. During this time, these buses have been as slow and unreliable as ever. I have been late to work several times because of slow, inconsistent buses. Additionally, as many routes were chronically overcrowded before the pandemic, with bus ridership returning faster than subway service, to about 60%, my bus routes are again packed, making the social distancing I practice the rest of my day impossible to follow during my commute.

When I was working in downtown Flushing, commuting from Jamaica was awful. Like many essential workers, I live beyond walking distance from the subway, and have to rely on buses to start my commutes. To get to Flushing, I would take two buses with a transfer in between, which was trouble because a double bus transfer means double the unreliability in my trip. The first leg of my trip was into Downtown Jamaica on the Q42 or the Q83 local or limited, two routes that – if I was lucky if I wouldn’t miss them. Since they function as three independent routes, if they all come at the same time, I could wait 20 minutes or more until the next one.

From Downtown Jamaica, I would transfer to either the Q44 or the Q20. The Q44 SBS route would get me to Flushing fast, 30% faster during the worst of the pandemic, but there were times when I waited half an hour for it to arrive. Other times, I would just give up and take the local, though that means I’m in for a long ride. Hopefully I brought my book.

The commute was bad, but it was even worse to hear from management, “you’re late”. Managers where I work must write up employees for being late, more than three times and they are fired, something I’ve seen happen to my co-workers. In this economy, I cannot afford to get fired, which means I cannot afford to be late.

Sometimes I work overnight and it is difficult to get home. I’ve had to take an Uber home from work many times because the bus did not show up, but I can’t pay for one every day. I know that the MTA has recently cut overnight subway service. While I take the bus to work, I know that people who work overnight shifts will be facing the same conversations I’ve had to have with my bosses.

Every time I get to work late, I risk losing my job. During a pandemic, with the unstable economy, and all of the risks I am taking just going to work, I should not have to worry about losing my job and losing my income because of unreliable bus service. With a third of New York City’s workforce facing unemployment, we cannot allow New Yorkers to lose jobs due to poor transit service. Service cuts and fare hikes would be devastating to those like me who continue to travel to jobs and help reopen the city each day.

New York City cannot recover if essential workers cannot get where we need to go. We need the state to make sure the MTA has the money it needs to not only keep service running, but improve it. The MTA should bring back overnight subway service as soon as possible, or let riders know when it plans to do so. We also ask that the state ensure the MTA does not raise fares on riders, especially when so many New Yorkers are unemployed or struggling to pay for a MetroCard. And finally, the MTA should make sure they are protecting essential workers by making mask wearing an easy choice for riders by keeping mask dispensers full and placing them in more locations.

Essential workers are the people who have kept New York City going during this difficult time. I am speaking today on behalf of essential workers across the city, we deserve better service – now more than ever.

Thank you.
