



NEWS

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CONTACT: GARY WOSK/MARC LITTMAN
MTA MEDIA RELATIONS
(213) 922-2712/922-2700
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BRILLE INSTITUTE AND L.A. CITY COLLEGE STUDENTS AND FACULTY PARTICIPATE IN 'ABILITIES DAY' AT NEW METRO RAIL SUBWAY STATION

Approximately 100 visually impaired and physically challenged students from Braille Institute and L.A. City College (LACC) today feel much more comfortable about using the Metro Rail subway following a visit to one of five new stations set to open June 12 when the system grows to 11.1 miles and extends to Hollywood.

The purpose of "Abilities Day," held Tuesday at the new Vermont/Santa Monica Metro Red Line station, and also attended by guide dogs, was to orient the disabled community to the operations of a subway station. One of two station entrances is located on the north corner of LACC, a neighbor of Braille Institute.

Sponsored by the MTA's Access Advisory Committee, Access Services, Inc., L.A. City Department of Disability, L.A. County Department on Disability and Guide Dogs of America, Abilities Day volunteers instructed students on all aspects of the stations' extensive fire and life safety components

Topics included tips on how best to enter the station, proper methods for safely boarding and exiting the train, with the help of tactile guidance tiles for the blind, and how to use escalators, elevators and ticket vending machines.

"It turned out to be a special day, a very productive day," said MTA ADA Compliance Officer Marilyn Morton. "One of the benefits was providing people with ample time to become acquainted with their new surroundings in a relaxed state. Now their comfort level has increased enough to take advantage of the subway system."

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Students at both schools believe the 4.6 mile extension of the subway will contribute to a more independent lifestyle because it will provide a quicker and less complicated means of traveling to school, jobs, cultural, entertainment and shopping destinations as well as health care facilities and socializing.

The availability of a second station entrance at Vermont and Willow Brook Avenue, some 100 yards closer to the schools than the main station entrance at Vermont and Santa Monica, was well received by students and faculty.

"The entrance is ideally situated for a person who is visually impaired," said Leslie Burkhardt, educational programs specialist for Braille Institute, which seeks to reinforce the confidence, self-esteem and dignity of the visually impaired. "We're so thrilled that this southern entrance is where it's at, it's a wonderful thing. Our students will only have to cross one street as a result. It's more practical, more focused."

Students at both schools said one of the main benefits of the subway will be arriving at school with time to spare.

"The subway will be the most convenient way for me to get to Braille Institute," said 26-year-old David Laramie, who estimated 30 minutes will be shaved off his time of arrival at school. "The subway will make it much more convenient for myself and others. Abilities Day was an excellent way to prepare me for the Metro Red Line."

Worry over possibly becoming disoriented while underground was the least of a visually impaired LACC student's worries, which she overcame.

"Before I visited the station my primary concern was earthquakes, but now, after speaking with and receiving assurance from the experts, I'm very impressed by the system and will ride it," said fine arts major Pamela Moss.

Moss, attending LACC through the Disabled Students Services, figures she'll save 90 minutes each day commuting from home because of the subway.

"I'm real happy about that. I'll have more time to either sleep in or paint."

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Braille Institute student Michael Rovelli is ebullient about the prospect of arriving on campus at least 15 minutes earlier.

"It's just too cool," says Rovelli. "Everyone is so excited. The more subways that open the more friendly public transportation systems will be to the disabled."

Braille Institute faculty member Carmen Apelgren, visually impaired, also expressed a strong liking for the subway, which she used extensively while living in such cities as New York and Boston.

"Subways are my friend. They're great, they're fast," says Apelgren. "I wasn't quite subway-ready in L.A., yet. That's why Abilities Day was so important to me and the others."

Psychologically, the two say they feel safe inside subway stations because of the presence of 8 to 10 station surveillance cameras per station, which are closely monitored by Rail Operations Control personnel who in turn are in direct contact with law enforcement agencies.

"My experience has been that in a subway station, especially if you're visually impaired, you feel less vulnerable to street crime," says Apelgren.

The head of LACC's Disabled Student Programs and Services believed information gained at Abilities Day will help the college better prepare the nearly 700 disabled students who depend on public transit when school resumes this coming Fall.

"This is one of the best ways for our students to get to school. You cannot stop progress," said Associate Dean Chadwick Woo, Jr., assistant professor of business administration. "Since this is their first visit to the station, the students still have some concerns but they will get over this initial apprehension when they find out it gives them more time."

A total of five new subway stations will be featured on the new 4.6-mile extension: along Vermont at Beverly and Santa Monica, and on Hollywood

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Boulevard at Western and Vine. One year later, the subway will extend all the way to the San Fernando Valley where approximately 20 percent of the Braille Institute students reside. That 6.3 mile extension will feature a station on Hollywood Boulevard at Highland and at Universal City and North Hollywood in the San Fernando Valley.

Approximately 478 of the 1,252 students enrolled at Braille Institute use public transit for commuting to school compared to 700 of the 1,400 disabled students attending Los Angeles City College. LACC's Woo estimated that 500 of LACC students will switch from using Metro Bus to the Metro Red Line for traveling to the campus.

In addition, officials from both schools indicate individual one-on-one subway use tutoring will be offered to reinforce lessons students learned at Abilities Day and to those who did not participate.

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