

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 6, 2017

The Honorable Susan Collins
Chairwoman
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Transportation, Housing and Urban
Development, and Related Agencies
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on
Transportation, Housing and Urban
Development, and Related Agencies
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chairwoman Collins and Ranking Member Reed,

We write to respectfully request increased funding for the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill. A series of tragic rail accidents in our region have highlighted NTSB's critical role in transportation safety, but without additional resources, the NTSB's mission could be significantly impaired. As you know, NTSB is mandated by Congress to address every civil aviation accident in the country, as well as significant railroad, highway, marine, and pipeline accidents. We cannot allow the Board's vital safety mission to be further undermined by budgets that reduce its ability to respond to accidents, regardless of where they occur. NTSB's work in our region is helping to save lives, and we are committed to aiding that work in whatever manner we are able.

The Northeast rail corridor—the most heavily trafficked railway in the country—and other passenger rail systems in the Northeast have suffered a number of accidents in recent years. In May 2013, NTSB began an investigation of a Metro-North commuter train derailment in Bridgeport, Connecticut that injured seventy-six people. That investigation expanded after Metro-North track foreman Robert Luden was struck and killed by a train later that month in West Haven, Connecticut. NTSB's investigation was forced to broaden yet again in December 2013, when four were killed and seventy were injured when a Metro-North train headed for Grand Central Terminal hit a thirty mile-per-hour curve while going eighty-two miles-per-hour in Spuyten Duyvil, New York. March 2014 saw another accidental death—that of Metro-North maintenance worker, James Romansoff—in East Harlem, while February 2015 brought a grade-crossing collision between a Metro-North passenger train and an SUV in Valhalla, New York, tragically killing five riders and the SUV's driver. May 2015 saw the most tragic and high-profile Amtrak accident in a generation, when a Northeast Regional train derailed in Philadelphia, killing eight passengers and injuring over two hundred others. In response, NTSB launched staff to support on-scene activities and download locomotive event recorders. NTSB engineers also processed forward-facing video and recovered surveillance video, portable electronic devices, and phone records from the wreckage. Other current open NTSB investigations include the October 2015 Northfield, VT Amtrak derailment, the April 2016 Chester, PA Amtrak derailment, the September 2016 Hoboken, NJ New Jersey Transit inter-terminal train collision, and the January 2017 Philadelphia SEPTA trolley collision, among others several others.

Throughout these major incidents and successive safety breaches at Amtrak and Metro-North, NTSB has been methodical, responsive, and capable in their investigations. They have shared important, life-saving recommendations with Metro-North, FRA, Amtrak, and state regulators to help avert future tragedies, all while responding to new incidents throughout the country and across all modes of transportation.

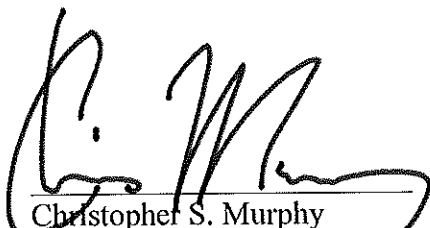
However, it is clear that NTSB's resources are being strained under the weight of so many ongoing investigations. NTSB has only thirteen railroad investigators, and four are now eligible for retirement. Those thirteen investigators are currently working on twenty-six open rail investigations. Further, NTSB currently only has two hazardous materials investigators who support investigations for all modes, and they are currently working on seven open investigations. While we have continually urged NTSB to complete its investigations as quickly as possible, the ability of the Board to speedily conclude such reviews is limited by its relatively small investigatory staff and the fact that it is simultaneously examining twenty-six railroad and rail transit accidents at the present time.

As the Board's FY 2015 budget request noted in a previous year, "although our budget is small, adequate funding is essential to fulfill our mission to advance and support the transportation safety of the American Public." The Board's FY15 request also noted, "The NTSB has little flexibility to absorb even small [cost] increases without affecting staffing levels because salaries, benefits, and fixed costs such as rent, shared services, and security constitute the majority of our budget."


We request that you fund the National Transportation Safety Board at \$108.7 million for FY2018, \$3.5 million above the FY2016 enacted level. This increase will allow the agency to fund ten critical investigative hires—five in rail, four in highway, and one in research and engineering.

We appreciate your attention to this important matter.


Sincerely,



Christopher S. Murphy
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator