

Policy Spotlight

Out of Order: Focusing on MTA Elevators and Escalators

Report by

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Summary

In 2022, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) committed to a capital program that will make 95% of subway stations accessible over the coming decades, an effort due in part to the tireless work of the disability community and advocates within the agency itself.

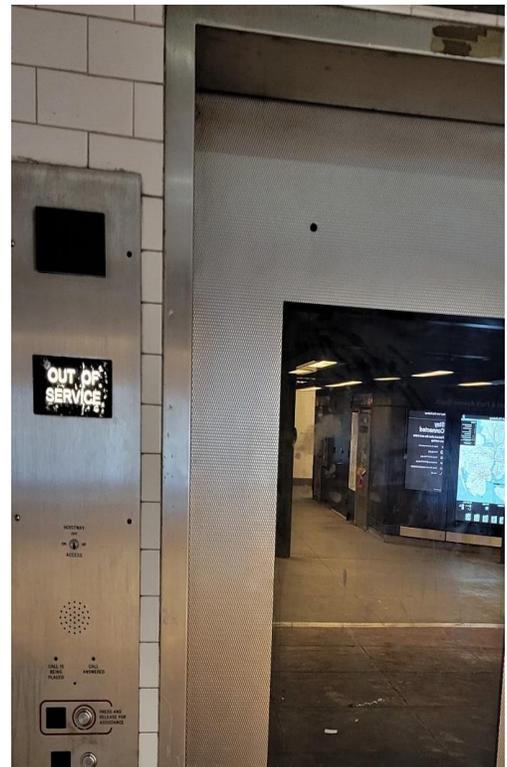
While this plan is implemented, it is of utmost importance that the limited number of elevators and escalators currently in the system are working properly, whether they are operated by the MTA directly or by third parties through public-private partnerships. Further, the MTA must make it easy as possible to plan trips in advance where riders seek to use assistive equipment. Our review during select days in January 2023 evaluated trip planning and equipment outage tools on the MTA website, monitored changes in temporary and long-term repair timelines, and analyzed differences between MTA- and privately-operated elevators.

Notable Findings

- An average of 34 elevators and 33 escalators were flagged on the [Elevator & Escalator Status](#) (Status) page at any given time during our review.
- Equipment operated by third parties performed most poorly, with some experiencing outages throughout the entire observation period. Outages at third-party sites were listed for 4.4 days on the Status page, while only 1.6 days for MTA elevators and escalators.
- Information on third party operators and which equipment they operate is very hard to find.
- The MTA planning tool and equipment status page fails to list planned outages in advance, while in-station signage is lacking for planned outage events.
- To report outages, riders have to use a clunky online reporting tool or experience long hold times if calling.

Key Recommendations

- The MTA should take stronger legal action against third parties failing to maintain equipment.
- The MTA should publicly list third party operators and the equipment under their care.
- The agency should better communicate future outages on their website.
- In-station signage for planned outages must improve to give riders clearer information.
- The MTA must make reporting outages easier to ensure rider participation and quicker repair response.



Introduction

New York City's subway boasted over 1 billion rides in 2022 and serves as the central transportation system for 8.5 million New Yorkers that call this city home. For this reason, a functioning subway system -- and the ability to deliver individuals to it -- is essential to transit's success.

Any obstacles to an accessible subway system affects a wide array of New Yorkers and visitors, especially individuals with disabilities, parents with strollers, or travelers carrying heavy luggage. Just over 25% of 472 subway stations are fully accessible with even lower percentages in low-income communities. However, these stations become inaccessible when elevators are out of order and burdensome when escalators stall.

While the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) should prioritize a quicker path to an accessible transit system, we must ensure that the subway's limited assistive equipment is working properly. When it is not, riders who rely on elevators, lifts, and escalators need to know they can rely on the notification systems and planning tools in place to properly map their routes to work, school, or doctor's appointments.

This snapshot of January 2023 set out to gauge the challenges related to outages of existing elevators and escalators and the ability for New Yorkers to plan trips in the subway system using online tools such as the MTA's [Trip Planner](#) and its [Elevator & Escalator Status](#) (Status) page.

This report also addresses issues related to non-MTA- (or third party) managed equipment's spotty record as compared to the agency's repair and maintenance regime. Understanding public-private agreements for station enhancements is especially important as the City Council approved the Zoning for Accessibility text amendment in 2021,¹ a scheme that provides opportunities for better access. As the MTA relies more on these partnerships to reach greater accessibility in the system, we looked at whether elevators and escalators operated by other public entities and private developers were performing as New Yorkers should expect.

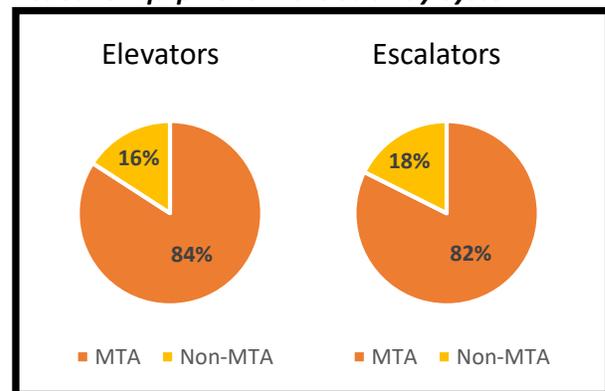
Methodology

Over the course of four weeks in January 2023, we tracked outages of MTA- and third party-operated elevator and escalator equipment with the Status page as a guide, evaluating repair times, posted delays, and which lines are most affected.

Although escalators are not a fully accessible means of egress, we included them as many riders rely on them in a transit system that falls short of compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act standards. The Status page was checked once per day, three times per week. Our review included random site inspections to check for the Status page's accuracy.

The MTA states 353 elevators exist in the system's fleet. 297 of these are maintained by the Authority, while 56 are managed by third parties. Of the 284 escalators that the MTA counts as serving the system, 234 are maintained by the Authority, while 50 are managed by third parties.² The distinction between MTA- and non-MTA-managed equipment was initially incidental but proved important to our review and subsequent recommendations.

Assistive Equipment in the Subway System



By the Numbers

Our review showed an average of 34 elevators out per day for select days in January 2023 and an average of 33 escalators. For all of 2022, elevator and escalator availability averaged 94.9% and 90.1% respectively.³ We show significantly lower average availability, although we might attribute this to different methodology, having counted all outages

listed by MTA at the time we checked the Status page, regardless of how temporary.

Overall, the subway lines most affected by equipment outages over the course of our study

were the E, Q, F, M, and A. This likely reflects, in part, the overall number of elevators and escalators in each line.

Elevator and Escalator Outages per Day

Equipment Type	Listed Outages per Day												Average Outages per Day	
All Equipment (MTA + non-MTA)	55	60	67	69	68	66	82	80	77	69	54	57	All Equipment	67
Elevators (MTA + non-MTA)	32	33	34	38	32	25	41	40	40	34	29	31	Elevators	34
Escalators (MTA + non-MTA)	23	27	36	31	36	41	41	40	37	35	25	26	Escalators	33

Note. Sample taken between Jan. 9 and Feb. 1, 2023

No. of Individual Elevator and Escalator Units with Outage(s) by Subway Line

Line	No. of Units with Outage	Line	No. of Units with Outage	Line	No. of Units with Outage
E	38	D	23	6	12
Q	37	5	23	3	12
F	36	2	20	Z	11
M	33	7	18	S (42nd St)	1
A	32	1	16	S (Franklin)	1
R	31	W	15	4	10
B	27	N	15	L	8
C	25	J	14	G	6

Note. Based on three observation days per week between Jan. 9 and Feb. 1, 2023

Private Maintenance

Although public-private partnerships are often touted as a route to subway accessibility, our review demonstrated that equipment maintained by third-party entities is a mixed bag. As past advocacy and press coverage has conveyed, several of these sites have been particularly problematic. Third party maintenance agreements typically result from a developer’s improvement to a concurrent or adjacent property, where they gained some design advantage from incorporating a station property or received some favorable zoning consideration in exchange for the improvement.⁴ In other cases, non-MTA public transit infrastructure that overlaps with subway stations may be designated as a third

party manager, such as at the Port Authority Bus Terminal and Howard Beach AirTrain stations.⁵

For the study period, the five worst-performing third party-managed sites were: 42nd Street-Bryant Park station (39th Street and 6th Avenue elevator); Howard Beach station (one elevator at entrance and another leading to the Queens-bound track); Times Square-Port Authority station (44th Street and 8th Avenue southwest entrance elevator and lift); 28th Street station (28th Street and Park Avenue South southwest entrance elevator); and 14th St-Union Square station (14th Street and 4th Avenue entrance escalators). Most have been cited as poor performers since before the COVID-19 pandemic in reports by organizations such as TransitCenter and local news outlets.⁶

Worst Performing Third Party Equipment

No. Outage Days	Station	Equipment ID Number(s)	Line(s) Affected
12	42nd St - Bryant Park	Elevator 295X	B, D, F, M
12, 12	Times Sq/Port Authority	Elevator 290x, 291x	A, C, E
12, 8	Howard Beach	Elevator 491x, 497x	A
7, 4	14th St - Union Square	Escalator 257X, 258x	L, N, Q, R, 4, 5, 6
7	28 St	Elevator 279x	6

Note. Based on three observation days per week between Jan. 9 and Feb. 1, 2023

Compared to MTA-managed equipment, elevators and escalators managed by third parties that experienced non-capital-related outages were out an average of 4.4 days vs. the MTA’s average of 1.6 days.

During our study, we had to call in two outages that were not reflected on the Status page (they were subsequently listed), even though the MTA has previously stated it inspects both MTA and non-MTA equipment regularly. There appears to be flaws in accountability under the public-private model which damage riders’ reliance on this vital infrastructure.

Capital Delays a Concern

Our review showed 24 outages related to planned capital replacement or rehabilitation projects for MTA-managed equipment, some of them for at least a year. Eight of these projects, or 33%, posted a delay to completion of one month or more during our study period. Either completion estimates must improve or the MTA should review contractor performance. Subsequent performance of some recently-rehabilitated equipment has been disappointing, corroborated by recent reporting.⁷

On a brighter note, we confirmed one rehabilitation project, an escalator at Hudson Yards station, was completed *ahead* of posted estimates.

The Tools That Riders Rely On

One of our objectives was to see how riders can plan accessible or escalator-assisted trips in real time or well in advance. We were pleased to see more real-time information on the MTA site than we expected. The Trip Planner appears to do well at reflecting equipment outages that are also posted in the Status page, although they both fall short for advanced trip planning. Although users may select “Show Future Outages” on the Status page, the selection provided no results during our observation period, even though the Status page frequently reflected outages termed “planned.”

Additionally, the MTA’s “Elevator Rehabilitation Schedule” page, meant for long-term outages, listed only four stations with long-term projects during our review (34th St-Penn Station, Roosevelt Island, Lexington Av/63rd St, and Flushing Ave), while the Status page listed six stations (the former, plus Borough Hall and WTC Cortlandt). All pages should be cross-referenced for accuracy or more clearly define what upgrades qualify as a rehab.

Inside stations, we observed little on-site signage related to elevator or escalator outages outside of longer-term capital improvements. Those riders who do not benefit from online access would be well-served by increased station signage in convenient locations that allows them to re-route should they require assistive equipment. Since future outages, even short-term planned or warranty repairs, are not reflected in advance on

the MTA website, physical signage is even more essential in such instances.

Conclusion

This study was conducted as a snapshot of current assistive equipment and rider planning tools. As the MTA pursues an enhanced accessibility plan and continues public-private programs, it should look to improve current protocols and web-based portals in tandem, per our recommendations. In terms of rider planning tools, the MTA is starting from a strong place from where to make simple and meaningful improvements. The Trip Planner and Status page provide good, real-time information on outages, but would benefit from including information on future outages, complemented by physical signage at repair sites.

As the City approved the Zoning for Accessibility text amendment, meant to increase public-private opportunities for station accessibility enhancements, the MTA must ensure that its equipment construction and operating agreements with developers result in proper and enforceable maintenance for what will hopefully be many meaningful improvements to the system. Otherwise, the MTA should only seek private partnership for capital construction and keep ongoing maintenance of new equipment, even that which is privately built, in-house.

Further, in one of the largest and more complicated transit systems in the world, riders fully expect capital projects will create some inconvenience. However, the MTA should do its best to ensure contractors are performing timely and quality work to make temporary disruptions worthwhile. Based on its better repair performance as compared to many third-party operators, it already demonstrates its capability in getting the job done.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implement stronger measures on third parties

The MTA must explore all options to force third-party operators to maintain equipment, whether through financial penalties or other legal avenues. Where property owners received zoning accommodations in exchange for station enhancements currently in poor repair, the City of New York should seek recourse as party to those actions. MTA must ensure that future third-party agreements allow stronger enforcement, even in cases where the partner is also an agency, such as the Port Authority.

Increase transparency on third-party agreements

New Yorkers and public interest groups should have easy access to information related to which entities own and/or operate equipment serving subway stations. MTA should make this easily accessible on its website or annual reports. It must also ensure these private operators are properly identified with accessible signage next to or within the equipment that includes telephone numbers to report outages.

Include all planned work on MTA website

Riders, especially those seeking assistive equipment, often plan their trips in advance. Neither the Trip Planner nor the “Elevator & Escalator Status” page provides sufficient information on future outages during the observation period or as of this report.

Improve in-station signage

As outages are planned for regular maintenance of elevators and escalators, the MTA must produce signage to allow riders advanced planning. Signage should be visible upon exiting trains and at entrances and exits, particularly where there are separate escalators and elevators across multiple station levels.

Streamline reporting tools for equipment outages

Dialing 511 can result in long wait times, while reporting outages on the MTA site involves multiple steps. Streamlined reporting or integration into NYC 311 would assist riders and maintenance teams alike. Publicizing the existence of 511 and encouraging riders to call in outages may alert maintenance crews more quickly and shorten outage times.

¹ “Elevate Transit: Zoning for Accessibility.” <https://www.nyc.gov/site/planning/plans/zoning-for-accessibility/zoning-for-accessibility-overview.page>

² “MTA Elevator and Escalator Performance Dashboard.” <http://eedashboard.mta.info/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ An example of a subway improvement zoning bonus exists at 1 Irving Place, whose developer received approval on a special permit in 1984 for new entrances with an elevator and escalators at 14th St – Union Square station.

⁵ AirTrain is maintained by French-based company Alstom since its acquisition of Bombardier Inc.

⁶ “The El-Evaders,” TransitCenter, 12 Nov 2018; Rivoli, Dan. “Private Companies Have Worse Track Record than MTA in Subway Elevators,” *New York Daily News*, 12 Nov. 2018; Jhun, Susan. “Broken Stairs at Union Square Station Have Riders in Need of a Lift,” *NY1 News*, 9 Mar. 2017;

⁷ Hicks, Noland and Georgett Roberts. “NYC Contractor for busted 2/3 elevators behind on other repairs,” *New York Post*, 30 Jan. 2023.