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How to stop the region's growing number of railroad fatalities?

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NJ Transit's modern train station in Hamilton, just north of Trenton, is a favorite with commuters, with lots of parking and easy access to I-295.

The station is also a favorite among death-seekers.

Five people in two years have been killed by trains there, all apparent suicides.

Amtrak trains, which don't stop at Hamilton, speed by the station at up to 135 m.p.h. on their way to and from New York City. In each of the five Hamilton deaths, the victims stood or jumped in front of Amtrak trains.

The deaths are part of a widespread problem on railroads in the area. In the last two years, at least 91 people have been killed by trains on NJ Transit and SEPTA lines.

Many intended to take their own lives, often to the horror of train engineers, passengers, and bystanders. Others were crossing or walking along tracks, apparently oblivious to approaching trains.

(Those 91 deaths of people railroads described as "trespassers" don't include seven people killed in train crashes with motor vehicles.)

Last year, 11 people were killed by SEPTA trains, the most in years. "The thing that jumped off the page was the number of suicides," said Jim Fox, SEPTA's director of system safety and risk management. Nine deaths were confirmed or likely suicides, investigators concluded.

The most recent was that of Yvonne M. Cephas, 65, of Lansdowne, struck Jan. 11 by a SEPTA train near the Lansdowne station.

Her death followed an especially grim month on area rails. In December, at least five people were killed.

Just before Christmas, two young men died three days apart on SEPTA's Warminster line near Hatboro, one ruled a suicide and the other an accident. (Their deaths brought to five the number of people killed since June by SEPTA trains on the Warminster line near Hatboro.)

A week earlier, Brendan Seward of Havertown died eight days before his 19th birthday when he jumped in front of a Norristown High-Speed Line train at the West Overbrook station.

On Dec. 13, Luis Buonacore Jr., 26, of Wrightstown, was killed by a NJ Transit River Line train as he walked the tracks north of the Florence station in Burlington County.

Two days after Christmas, Troy Murphy, 25, of New York City, was killed by an NJ Transit train in Pennsauken at the Church Road crossing.

Such deaths often receive scant public notice; victims can go unidentified for months.

Sometimes, though, they shatter a community.

Two years ago, a double suicide by train devastated Delaware County's Glenolden borough and brought renewed attention to the danger.

In that tragedy, Vanessa M. Dorwart, 15, and Gina C. Gentile, 16, students at Interboro High School, were killed by an Amtrak train as they embraced on the tracks near the Norwood station. The girls reportedly were despondent over a friend's recent death.

Nationwide, at least 434 "trespassers" were killed by trains in 2010, up from 415 in 2009, according to data compiled by the Federal Railroad Administration. In 2011, through October, 365 fatalities were reported.

Because tracks often are accessible and unguarded, they can be magnets for those looking for a shortcut, an adventure, or an end to life.

For train engineers, people on the tracks are a terrifying occupational hazard. Operating a train that kills a person leaves some engineers unable to return to work and others haunted by their inability to avoid the tragedy.

In 2010, Tom Haas, an NJ Transit engineer, was operating a train that killed a 12-year-old boy walking the tracks near Hackensack. He blew the horn and hit the emergency brake, to no avail. "It was so fast. But it was like the longest period in my life," Haas, 32, of Roselle Park said. "I was trying to will him out of my way."

"He had his back to me. I believe he didn't know a train was coming. He took a step into the train at the worst possible moment."

Police believe the boy was wearing earphones.

When Haas returned home, he discovered his son, 5, had seen news footage of Haas in the train cab after the accident, prompting him to ask, "Why is Daddy on TV?"

"That was tough for me to come home and try to explain to my son that somebody died because Daddy's train hit him," Haas said.

Haas now speaks to groups as part of an NJ Transit effort to teach students to stay off the rails. Since the accident, when he sees people near the tracks, "It scares me sometimes. I don't want to go through it again."

For Tom Dorricott, the SEPTA engineer operating the train in last month's Lansdowne death, the apparent suicide was the fourth fatality he had been involved with in his 30-year career: two suicides, a car crash, and a SEPTA rail worker who was struck.

"A SEPTA locomotive engineer who is not involved in a fatality during his or her career would be the exception," said Dorricott, an officer in the engineers' labor union, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen.

In January, Dorricott, 57, was at the throttle of a train as it left the Lansdowne station on the Media-Elwyn line.

"The lights were flashing, the barriers were down, I was accelerating and blowing the horn," he said. Cephas "literally stepped out of the shadows right in front of my train.

"I threw the brake on, but there is nothing you can do. It's a helpless feeling.

"I braced for the impact, but I couldn't feel it," he said. But he heard it: "a clanging sound."

Railroad people are a stoic lot, Dorricott said, and the possibility of hitting someone is something engineers try not to dwell on. Nonetheless, he said, it can be difficult for engineers to return to work immediately. He criticized SEPTA for not giving them more time off after a fatality.

"They offer counseling but expect engineers to be back to work after the drug-test results come back negative," he said. "Usually after only one day."

Dorricott said he was expected to report for work 48 hours later.

"I had to use sick time - we only get five days - until I was ready to come back."

SEPTA spokesman Richard Maloney did not specifically address Dorricott's claim, but said those involved in fatalities were immediately offered counseling and, if they have a medical excuse, would not be required to return to work.

To prevent deadly accidents and suicides, railroad companies often erect fences along tracks and post warning signs. Transportation experts say more can be done.

*Walls along station platforms, "intrusion detection" cameras, and electronic monitors to alert engineers to objects or people on the tracks are among the solutions used in other countries or in testing here, said **Carl Berkowitz**, a transportation and traffic engineering expert.*

Japan, which has frequent train suicides, has five-foot-high walls around many station platforms, with doors that open only when a train has stopped at the station.

Could something like that save lives at the Hamilton station in New Jersey?

*Repeated fatalities at one location mean "something is wrong," **Berkowitz** said.*

"You need to be proactive," he said. "If something happens over and over, you can no longer consider it an 'unexpected event.' "

Railroad officials and engineers say it's hard to stop people set on killing themselves.

"When someone tries to take their life," NJ Transit spokeswoman Penny Bassett Hackett said, "there's not much you can do."

SEPTA conducted rail-safety sessions at 18 stations last year, handing brochures to about 6,200 customers.

NJ Transit has put up three small anti-suicide posters on the platforms at Hamilton, providing a hotline number for people to call if they're "feeling desperate, depressed, or suicidal."

Amtrak spokeswoman Danelle Hunter said that Amtrak takes its prevention measures very seriously, but that "it is not feasible to fence the entire Northeast Corridor." There are no plans to install physical barriers at the Hamilton station, she said.

Amtrak has "partnered with local law enforcement on regularly scheduled police patrols along Amtrak-owned property," she said. In Hamilton, it works with NJ Transit to patrol the area, she said.

Amtrak, NJ Transit, and SEPTA also participate in Operation Lifesaver, a nonprofit organization that sends speakers to school and civic groups to talk about rail safety.

In November, New Jersey Transportation Commissioner James Simpson established a committee to seek ways to reduce the carnage.

The panel's mission, Simpson said then, is "to take a fresh look at the state's rail network with a mandate to do everything possible to prevent fatalities."

A spokesman for Simpson said the committee's findings were expected soon.