

UNITED SPINAL^{NOW}

Subway Death and Lack of Elevators

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The tragic death of Connecticut native, Malaysia Goodson, who fell down a flight of subway steps holding her one-year old child (who was unhurt) brought out politicians and media, as well as disabled activists, clamoring for more subway elevators.

While disabled activists have been seeking access to New York City subways for 40 years, until recently only a hand full of politicians and editorial boards have felt the same way.

United Spinal Association (then called Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association (EPVA)) settled its lawsuit with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) in 1984. New York City agreed to become the first old rail city in the nation to retrofit “key” stations and provide wheelchair access. Buses are accessible because of the settlement and Access-A-Ride paratransit services were created because of the settlement.

At the time, the most liberal Democrats had to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to provide merely key station access. Mayor Ed Koch opposed us. The MTA board, which included such liberal Democratic champions as City Council Pres. Carol Bellamy, MTA Board Chair Richard Ravitch and Liberal Party Chair Stephen Berger, opposed subway and bus access.

The *New York Times* opposed public transportation access. When United Spinal stopped subway station renovation via court order, the *Times* wrote an editorial using the phrase “there’s a wheelchair on the tracks.” All the other major news outlets’ editorial boards opposed access. Incidentally, in 1990, the *Times* opposed the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as well.

It is no wonder that New York City elected officials felt safe from political retribution when the *Times* editorial page was promoting the perpetuation of discrimination against people with disabilities. The *Times* favored paratransit only.

Remember Access-A-Ride’s budget is \$600 million this year and that’s with every bus accessible and well over 100 subway stations accessible. Moreover, no thanks to these same politicians, and due to the intrepid advocacy of N.Y.C.’s disability community, more than 1,000 for-hire vehicles are accessible or there would be even more demand for Access-A-Ride.

Why is the subway still so inaccessible? After all, there are 466 subway stations and only a little over 100 have elevators. It is because the moral consciousness of this city was not offended when public transit ignored the needs and rights of people with disabilities. Unlike politicians in Washington D.C., who supported the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, N.Y.C.’s politicians from the late 1970’s until recently did not make this issue a priority because they were given so much cover by the media.

Now, after a young mother lost her life on the subway stairs, New Yorkers are wondering why older rail cities like Chicago and Boston have a much higher percentage of stations usable by people with mobility impairments.

It is because we, at United Spinal/EPVA were too optimistic about what a key station access settlement would mean. We thought New Yorkers would rally around people with disabilities once they saw them using transit and that by 2019 the collective conscience of all New Yorkers, including elected officials and editorial boards, would have demanded equal access.