

SEPTA creating Facilities Division

The new department to manage infrastructure - such as escalators- is part of ongoing restructuring.

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The fallout from last year's record jury verdict against SEPTA for the escalator incident that tore off a four year old boy's foot continued yesterday when general manager John K. Leary Jr. announced the details of a major reorganization of the transit authority.

A new department, created apart from transit operations - is intended to ensure the safety of escalators and the maintenance of all other infrastructure, a key feature of the SEPTA overhaul, Leary said.

"People making sure escalators were working were also making sure buses got out of the terminal on time," Leary said. the new department, he said, "will bring a different focus on SEPTA's facilities."

In January, SEPTA's board commissioned an investigation after a jury in December awarded \$7.4 million to Shareif Hall, who, lost his foot in 1996.

Criticizing SEPTA for withholding legal documents and tampering with evidence - including planting a shoelace a the scene of the accident at the Cecil B. Moore station to indicate the boy had tripped - Common Pleas Court Judge Frederica Massiah-Jackson fined the agency an additional \$1 million, an amount later reduced to \$100,000.

An agency investigation later blamed a "culture of complacency" and poor communication within SEPTA for mishandling the Hall case.

In Leary's first major shakeup since he arrived in 1997, he announced on May 26, the abrupt departure of longtime chief legal counsel Roger Bowers, 70, and the disciplining of several employees who have not been identified publicly.

Since then, Philadelphia Lawyer, Leon Tucker, who helped SEPTA handle the Hall case, has been removed from the agency's list of approved outside counsel, Leary said yesterday. Tucker could not be reached for comment.

[Tom Kline](#), the Philadelphia lawyer who represented Hall, applauded the changes yesterday but said he still sought a public accounting by SEPTA of who was disciplined for what actions in the Hall case.

"It is commendable that SEPTA has taken stock of itself and has decided to reorganize so that something can come out of the tragedy," Kline said.

Many of the specific changes called for by the panel that investigated SEPTA after the Hall case will be made by an internal task force in the next six months, Leary said.

Among those are the reestablishment of a certain system of investigating and tracking accidents and increased and increased training for safety staff. To better coordinate legal claims, a major criticism of SEPTA in the Hall case, staff have begun meeting regularly to review the progress of new legal cases, Leary said.

Restructuring SEPTA into five units responsible for functions such as finance, legal operations and human resources, and six more departments devoted to the business of running transit services, should be completed by the end of December, Leary said.

A notable change is the creation of a new capital design and construction department, reporting directly to Leary about SEPTA's \$485 million fiscal year capital budget, its largest ever building campaign.

While the Hall case prompted the internal changes, Leary said service would not be disrupted for the system's 500,000 estimated daily riders in Philadelphia and four suburban counties.

But the Hall case may have dampened SEPTA's relationship with some legislators in Harrisburg.

The authority is hoping for passage early next week of \$300 million in funding, the state's share of the proposed \$1.6 billion Schuylkill Valley Metro line, SEPTA's first new rail line in decades, to run 62 miles from Philadelphia to Reading.

"I don't think we should be talking about giving them additional money," State Representative Dwight Evans (D., Philadelphia) said yesterday.

". . . SEPTA's leadership has lost credibility with me. I'm waiting to see results on how they maintain their escalators and elevators."

Leary said the anticipated funding "is an example of the momentum propelling SEPTA forward."