

Tragedy on the Tracks

SEPTA knew train locks didn't work — Kids can open booths with a sharp object

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SEPTA has known for two years that kids riding the Broad Street Subway have been picking locks on the motorman booths.

Stick just about anything sharp in the lock and turn.

But it took the agency until yesterday, one week after a North Philadelphia boy was killed after entering one of the booths and leaning out the window, to admit the problem.

SEPTA last year quietly began switching the spring-loaded locks to a harder-to-pick dead bolt style. It doesn't expect to finish the job for another seven months.

"We've never had an injury before," said Jim Jordan, SEPTA's assistant general manager for safety management. "The kids would play with the lights. They would play on the PA system."

Kyle Harris, a 12-year-old riding home on the Broad Street line July 11 after rollerskating with friends, gained access to a motorman booth at the rear of a northbound subway train.

His broken body was discovered that night on the tracks near the Race-Vine station. Investigators believe he stuck his head or part of his body out of the window in the booth and was hit by two poles in the subway tunnel. Philadelphia police and SEPTA are still investigating the accident. Both agencies declined to discuss the case yesterday.

Kyle's father, Aaron DeShields, hired an attorney to seek information after SEPTA rebuffed his attempts to find out what happened to his son on the subway.

"I'm lost," DeShields said. "I don't have answers." DeShields' attorney, Tom Kline, successfully sued SEPTA in a high-profile 1999 trial involving a 4-year-old boy maimed by a Broad Street Subway station escalator.

Kline said that in the Harris case, SEPTA was negligent for not immediately fixing locks it knew weren't secure.

"There's a clear defect in the way the thing is manufactured," he said. He also blasted SEPTA for withholding information about the accident. "What is more important-getting information to a grieving family or the secrecy and the confidentiality of an investigation being done by SEPTA to protect itself in liability in a future lawsuit?" asked Kline, who added it's still not clear how Kyle gained access to the motorman's booth. Earlier this week, SEPTA spokesman Richard Maloney said doors to the motorman cabs lock automatically. He said the booth that Kyle Harris had entered was locked when it was inspected after the accident. He did not mention the problem with the easily picked locks.

Harry Lombardo, head of Transport Workers Union Local 234, said subway operators have been complaining to SEPTA for 18 months about problems with kids and the locks.

"They were messing with the passengers, making announcements," Lombardo said of kids who gained access to the subway's public-address system. "In fact, there was even a bomb threat once."

The union is not happy with the pace of the lock replacement. "It's like every other issue with SEPTA that involves money," Lombardo said. "They drag their feet. They cry broke."

SEPTA officials said that there are a total of 165 locks on Broad Street Subway cars. About 25 percent have been fixed, the agency said. Last year, SEPTA began shipping 20 locks at a time to the manufacturer, which switched them with the deadbolt-style locks and returned them to SEPTA.

Recently, SEPTA said, it began shipping 30 to 40 locks at a time to the manufacturer for the switch.

The lock change on all the subway cars should be finished by February, according to SEPTA.

Until then, the danger remains for curious kids on the subway. No signs warn of danger in the motorman compartments, and nothing admonishes trespassers to stay out.

It's unclear when Philadelphia's youths discovered the secret of the easily picked locks.

When SEPTA first received the Japanese-built Kawasaki subway cars in the early 1980's, they were touted as terrorist-proof.

Accompanied by a photographer, a Daily News reporter rode the Broad Street Subway for three days this week, talking with people about the locks. On Tuesday, the motorman booth door on car 521A was unlocked as the subway headed south at 1:45 p.m. On four other subway cars, the doors were locked. But there was no shortage of young riders willing to give advice on how to get in.

A 28-year-old accounting clerk, who asked not to be identified, said she saw a teen-ager use an ordinary house key to enter a motorman's booth last August. The teen flicked the subway lights on and off.

"It scared the daylights out of me," she said. "And I thought SEPTA needed to know how easy it was to get into those doors."

The woman said she complained to SEPTA police and that they took her phone number and promised she would get a phone call from the agency. She said she never did.

She said she later e-mailed a complaint to SEPTA. She got no reply. Yesterday, a raucous group of teens hopped the last car of the northbound Broad Street line about 1 p.m.

The teens say they were familiar with Kyle's story, from their parents and through word of mouth.

"He probably used a key or some kind of car to get in," said a 14-year-old named Jemal, who rides the subway at least twice a day. "It's real easy to get in there you know. And when they get in they might just smoke and play around inside."

Jemal said he has never tried to get inside the booth, but has seen other teen-agers get inside at least once a day. He said most teens prefer to hop on the last car since the operator is in the front car.

"Maybe the door was just left open," said Cherie, 14, who like Jemal, rides the train at least twice a day.

Last week's tragedy left passengers wondering how it could happen and why it took so long for it to be made public.

"It is sad and I feel for his family, but I didn't know anything about what happened until I read it in the paper," said Catherine Pettijohn, a retiree from West Oak Lane. "I kind of wondered why I didn't hear about it sooner." "But," she asked, "who do you blame for this? The kid for playing around? SEPTA should have done a little more security, tried harder to ensure that those doors are locked. That could have saved a child's life." *