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87 Are Hurt as Subway Train Runs Into Another in Queens

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Rounding a curve in the waning minutes of the morning rush yesterday, a six-car subway train rear-ended another train that had paused at a red light in the tunnel between two stations in Queens, bumping and bruising 87 passengers and disrupting the underground lifeline for thousands of workers in three boroughs.

The 15-mile-an-hour crash also betrayed a flaw in the placement of signs on the platforms that tell train operators where to stop.

A Forest Hills-bound G train hit an eight-car R train coming from Manhattan that was filled with weary night-shift workers heading home and secretaries, nannies and hospital aides just beginning their day. Passengers who had been dozing, counting the stops or reading mystery novels were suddenly flung from their seats and thrown to the floor in a crash that some said sounded like trucks smashing into each other.

"We were just enjoying the ride, and boom," said Yomarys Valencia, who lives in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and was on the way to her job at the Department of Environmental Protection in Queens.

The crash was the third major subway accident this year. On July 3, 13 passengers were injured when the last car of an A train jumped the track while moving through the 135th Street station. Investigators concluded that a track worker had flipped a track switch that the train was crossing. Less than two weeks later, four people were hurt in a similar mishap on a No. 2 train approaching the President Street station in Brooklyn. That accident was attributed to the failure of a relay device.

Transit officials who spent hours simulating yesterday's crash, just beyond the Steinway Street station in Long Island City, said the two trains were caught in a domino effect. The R train had been stopped at a red light because the train ahead of it was waiting in the 46th Street station, where a signal was malfunctioning.

As for the signals at the Steinway Street station, they appeared to have functioned properly, said James Dunn, an investigator from the National Transportation Safety Board. With the R train on

the tracks between the two stations, officials said, the signal at the end of the Steinway Street platform should have been red.

But the train operator told investigators from the safety board that it was green. So did one witness, who works at a dry-cleaning shop in Richmond Hill, Queens, and just missed the doomed G train at Steinway Street. The man, Angel Vallejo, 29, said the crash felt like "a miniature earthquake."

For much of the day, investigators speculated that the train operator had crept by the signal using a procedure known as "keying by." This overrides the emergency braking system and avoids tripping a spring-loaded arm in the trackbed that brings the train to a halt at speeds above 4 miles an hour. Train operators are supposed to "key by" a red signal only after receiving permission from a dispatcher or subway control tower.

Officials said the operator of the G train had not been given such clearance yesterday.

But in New York City's ancient subway system, there is nothing to prevent a motorman from sidestepping that regulation. "There's no fail-safe system that says, 'O.K., you're going more than 5 miles an hour, we're going to shut you down,' like on other train systems," said John Lockley, a line superintendent for New York City Transit, the agency that runs the subways.

After spending hours simulating the accident, officials said it had pointed up a flaw in the location of the signs directing motormen where to stop along the platform at many subway stations. Investigators said signs at some stations -- including the Steinway Street stop -- put the first car too close to the stop arm. When a train pulls out from that point, whether the operator is keying by or just accelerating to a normal speed, the arm cannot trip the brakes the way it is supposed to.

Officials said they solved the problem at the Steinway Street station by moving the marker where the train is supposed to stop a few feet back on the platform. They also began checking other stations throughout the city for the same problem last night.

Officials of New York City Transit would not identify the operator of the G train involved in the crash but said he had had no operating violations in four years on the job. A spokesman for the agency said that the only blemish in the operator's personnel file was for excessive absences. The train operator was tested for drugs and alcohol after the accident, but the results of the tests were not released.

An instructor of motormen, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the G train operator was a good motorman.

"He was a conductor on my train when I was a motorman," the instructor said. "He's a good guy, a good motorman."

Officials said they did not know if the G motorman had applied the emergency brake before he struck the R.

The accident disrupted service on Manhattan-bound R and Brooklyn-bound G trains until about 1 P.M. Queens-bound trains on the R and G lines did not begin running until 4 P.M. The transit agency halted service on the E and F lines, which run near the Steinway Street station but do not stop there during the day, between 9:30 and 10:20 A.M.

Denis Dixon, a passenger on the train that was struck said it had been waiting in the tunnel for only about 10 seconds. "I was sitting there one minute," said Mr. Dixon, who was on his way to a court hearing in Jamaica. "The next minute I was on the floor and the lights were out."

A woman who had been in the Steinway Street station ran outside and flagged down Officer Victor Flores from the 114th Precinct, who was in his patrol car at Steinway Street and Broadway, a crossroads for furniture, bridal-gown and automobile-glass stores. In the moment it took to reach the subway entrance, his radio cracked with word that a caller to 911 had reported an explosion.

Officer Flores and his partner, Officer Todd Dockswell, realized that it was not an explosion but a subway accident, though they underestimated the scope. "I radioed for a couple of ambulances," he said. "The first car seemed normal. The lights were on. Then we started seeing cars tilted on the tracks."

Within minutes, transit workers had propped a folding stairway against the train and were leading passengers along a catwalk to emergency exits. Most were taken to Jamaica Hospital, Booth Memorial Medical Center and Elmhurst Hospital Center, where they were treated and released.