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February 28, 2011

Ms. Elsa Ortiz, President Board of Directors
 Ms. Mary King, General Manager
 Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District
 1600 Franklin Street, 10th Floor
 Oakland, CA 94612

RE: Transit Fare Policy, Affordable Fares for Youth, Seniors, and Disabled, and Health Equity

Dear President Ortiz and Ms. King:

Transportation is essential for creating healthy people and healthy communities. It ensures people are able to access the opportunities and resources essential for meeting some of our most basic needs: food, work, education, civic participation and social interaction. When access to this most basic resource is placed just out of reach for our most vulnerable populations, those individuals and the broader community’s health is jeopardized.

We are striving for an Alameda County where all children, no matter the color of their skin, how much money in their parents’ bank accounts, or their neighborhood, have the same opportunity for a long and healthy life. Currently, there is a 15-year life expectancy gap between an African American from West Oakland and a White person from the Oakland Hills. This persistent health inequity is directly linked to persistent inequities in access to essential social goods like transportation, housing, education, employment, and so on.

It is in our pursuit of health equity that we express our concern that current Transit Fare Policy’s planned fare increases for the youth, senior and disabled monthly passes will make the fares unaffordable and place a strain on the health of these populations, their families and communities. Public Health commends your foresight and leadership in drafting a transit fare policy that will not only make it easier for your agency to plan for changes in fare revenues, but allow AC Transit users to better anticipate fare increases. However, a 140% increase in monthly youth passes and an 80% increase in monthly senior and disabled passes is a significant change in transportation-related costs. Even though the proposal is to implement the increases incrementally between July 2011 and 2019, it will be hard for low-income households to absorb these increases given that low-income workers’ real wages are actually declining and that many seniors and disabled people are on fixed incomes. **Appendix A describes the potential health equity impacts of changes to the youth, senior and disabled monthly pass fare increase, as proposed in the Transit Fare Policy**

There is no doubt that AC Transit must raise revenue. We are also struggling with rising demand and falling revenue and are facing very difficult choices. Despite these budget problems, we cannot adopt policies that impede the struggle for equity. The projected revenue gains from increases to the youth, senior and disabled passes are not worth the risk to these populations’ health.

We respectfully request that you change the AC Transit Fare Policy fare structure for the youth, senior and disabled monthly passes so that the policy does not disproportionately negatively burden low-income people and people of color. We also encourage AC Transit to continue working closely with the public,

particularly with transit-dependent riders and their organizations, as well as other agencies and elected bodies, to identify long-term, stable funding sources to prevent major fare hikes or service cuts in the future. Please do not hesitate to contact us for help ensuring that the AC Transit Fare Policy puts on the road toward health equity.

Sincerely,

Supervisor Keith Carson
Alameda County Board of Supervisors

Anita Siegel, RN, MPH
Director, Alameda County Public Health Department

cc: Alex Briscoe, Director, Health Care Service Agency
AC Transit Board of Directors

Healthy Equity and AC Transit Fare Policy Proposal: The Impact of the Proposed Fare Increase for Monthly Youth, Senior, & Disabled Bus Passes on Low-Income People of Color

Falling Wages, Rising Transportation Costs and Impact on Low-Wage Worker-Led Households

Alameda County youth rely on AC Transit to travel to and from school, making the monthly youth bus pass a required purchase for many Alameda County families. While some youth purchase their own bus passes (more on this below), the cost often falls to parents and legal guardians. Unfortunately for low-income worker¹-led households, inflation adjusted hourly wages declined by 8.1 percent between 1979 and 2009 across California, and current forecasts are not predicting a reversal of this trend any time soon.² Given the fact that real wages for low-income workers are falling, any fare increases will necessarily require low-income worker-led households to dedicate a larger share of shrinking household income to transportation, leaving fewer resources available for food, shelter, medical care and all the goods necessary for health.³ Already, the average household earning less than \$20,000 per year spends over 50% of its incomes on transportation compared to 7% of income among the average household earning \$100,000 per year. Furthermore, national evidence indicates that transportation costs are rising at a faster rate for low-income households than for higher income households.⁴ Since Alameda County's residents of color are more likely than white residents to be both low-income and transit dependent, and as a result their children are more likely to exclusively rely on AC Transit to get to school, the proposed fare increase will disproportionately burden low income households of color. In so far as the proposed policy will contribute to environment in which low-income families of color must make unhealthy tradeoffs just to survive, it threatens to contribute to Alameda County's ongoing struggle with health inequities.

Youth Access to Opportunities for Lifelong Health

School-aged youth rely on AC Transit to get to school, as well as extra-curricular activities, social events, and jobs. According to a 2001 Oakland Kids First study⁵ – conducted when the monthly youth bus pass was \$27, or \$12 above the current cost and \$9 below what is proposed in the Transit Fare Policy – low-income youth of color already reported difficulties affording a monthly youth bus pass. Increasing the cost of the monthly youth bus pass is likely to negatively impact individual youth's and their communities' health through the pathways described below.

- **Truancy, at risk behaviors, drop out rates, and long-term health trajectories:** Studies indicate that access to transportation is one factor in determining truancy, or unexcused absence from school.⁶ Truancy, in turn, directly impacts health through its links to substance abuse and involvement in criminal activity. Furthermore, adults who were truant as adolescents are more likely than those who were not to have poor health and mental health.⁷ Chronic school absenteeism, which includes both excused and unexcused absences, indirectly impacts health through its links to academic outcomes. Urban Strategies Council

¹ Defined as workers in the 20th percentile of the California's earnings distribution

² *Stuck Between a Recession and a Recovery: California's Workers Face the Toughest Job Market in Decades*; http://www.cbp.org/pdfs/2010/1009_Labor_Day.pdf

³ *Life and Death From Unnatural Causes: Health and Social Inequity in Alameda County*; http://www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/00_2008_full_report.pdf

⁴ *Life and Death From Unnatural Causes: Health and Social Inequity in Alameda County*; http://www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/00_2008_full_report.pdf

⁵ *Free Transportation to Get Our Education*; <http://www.kidsfirstoakland.org/?s=91&n=12>; At the time of the study, the monthly youth bus pass cost \$27.

⁶ *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students In School*; <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/188947.pdf>

⁷ *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students In School*; <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/188947.pdf>

found that by 6th grade, chronic school absenteeism is a predictor of OUSD drop out rates.⁸ The links between educational and health outcomes are extensive. For instance, each additional year in school is associated with increased life expectancy and better health.⁹ Alameda County residents who live in neighborhoods with less than 70% high school graduation rate live on average 7 years fewer than residents in neighborhoods with at least a 90% high school graduation rate.¹⁰ In OUSD, low-income students and students of color are more likely to be truant and to drop out of school than their white counter-part. Increasing the cost of the youth bus pass could result in an increase in school absences, placing youth and community health at risk. Furthermore, since youth of color are more likely than their white counter-parts to report difficulties affording the pass,¹¹ and because they are also more likely to be truant and to drop out of school, raising the youth bus pass will disproportionately impact low-income students of color, contributing to the perpetuation of health inequities.

- **Unaffordable Transportation and Nutrition:** Unaffordable transportation cheats youth out of access to healthy food. For instance, Oakland Kids First found that seventy-six percent of the students they surveyed used their lunch money to pay for bus passes.¹² Additionally, students who have to miss school because of a lack of affordable transportation are not be able to participate in the breakfast and lunch programs, and thus may not receive the nutrition they need to thrive. The rates of diet related diseases, such as diabetes, overweight and obesity, are already higher among youth of color than white youth. Decreasing access to nutritious school lunches encourages youth to buy the low-cost, high calorie foods that are thought to be driving the current diabetes and obesity epidemics. Again, given that youth of color are more likely than white youth to report difficulties affording a bus pass, increasing the cost of transportation would contribute to perpetuating health inequities.
- **Access to After-School Activities and Violence Prevention:** Kids First's study also found that almost half, or 49 percent, of low-income students surveyed found it harder to get to after-school programs without a free bus pass. Participation in after-school programs is linked with student achievement and violence prevention, both of which are linked to health equity. Homicide is the leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 24 in Alameda County, as opposed to the second leading cause of death for the same age group. In 2002/2003 MTC and AC Transit partnered to create a free youth bus pass program. This program was discontinued in September 2003 due to a lack of funding. According to an evaluation of the program¹³, after-school program coordinators found an increase in student participation in after-school programs while the free bus pass program was in operation. Making transportation less affordable could decrease participation in after-school activities, decrease academic performance, and contribute to increases in violence. Again, since African American men are more likely to die from homicide than any other racial/ethnic group,¹⁴ increasing the cost of the monthly youth bus pass would contribute to perpetuating health inequities.
- **Access to Jobs and Income:** The same evaluation revealed that high school students with the free bus pass were using on the bus to get better after-school jobs. Access to income is essential for health.
- **Climate Change:** Nationally, as much as 20 to 30% of morning traffic can be attributed to parents driving their children to schools. Increasing the cost of the monthly youth bus pass could lead to an increase in school-related trips, generating more greenhouse gases and contributing to climate change.

⁸ OUSD Chronic School Absenteeism Study; <http://www.infoalamedacounty.org/issueareas/education/school-absenteeism/item/15-ousdabsent>

⁹ Life and Death From Unnatural Causes: Health and Social Inequity in Alameda County; http://www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/00_2008_full_report.pdf

¹⁰ Life and Death From Unnatural Causes: Health and Social Inequity in Alameda County; http://www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/00_2008_full_report.pdf

¹¹ Free Transportation to Get Our Education; <http://www.kidsfirstoakland.org/?s=91&n=12>

¹² Free Transportation to Get Our Education; <http://www.kidsfirstoakland.org/?s=91&n=12>

¹³ Low-income Student Bus Pass Pilot Project Evaluation; <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/6bb0b571?display=all>

¹⁴ Youth Health and Wellness in Alameda County, 2006; <http://www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/00-youth2006-final.pdf>

Senior and Disabled Access to Basic Needs

Senior and disabled populations also rely on transit to connect with jobs, medical care, grocery stores, and social opportunities. While the link between jobs and health and medical care and health are quite clear, the links to social opportunities are discussed here. Community cohesion and strong social relationships protect health by providing emotional and material support, preventing feelings of isolation and contributing to self esteem and value. For instance, participants in an Alameda County study with few social contacts had twice the risk of early death. Additionally, a lack of social ties and social interaction is linked to mental disorders such as depression.¹⁵ Given Alameda County's growing senior population, many of whom will be fixed income, as well as the extent of the proposed cuts to services and income supports for the disabled population, increasing the cost of transportation could negatively impact health of these two very vulnerable populations.

¹⁵ *Life and Death From Unnatural Causes: Health and Social Inequity in Alameda County*;
http://www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/00_2008_full_report.pdf