



**Testimony of Phillip A. Saperia for the
meeting of the
MTA Board of Directors
January 25, 2000**

Chairman Conway, members of the Board, my name is Phillip A. Saperia. I am Executive Director of The Coalition of Voluntary Mental Health Agencies, Inc. an association of over 100 not-for-profit providers of community based mental health services in all five boroughs. I am here today to urge you to implement the Half Fare Fairness Act of 1999.

People with mental illness suffer countless forms of discrimination every day. In housing, employment, transportation, insurance coverage and in the funding of treatment services they are treated as second-class citizens. Every day they experience the effects of stigma—the negative attitude that attaches to mental illness in our society. Stigma is present in every aspect of their lives. People living with mental illness are waging a two sided struggle—one with the illness they were born with and one with the society that holds them less worthy because of it. I am here today because, unfortunately, for the past fifteen years the half fare benefit for people with disabilities has been yet another of these discriminatory practices. People with psychiatric disabilities have been unable to profit from it.

As you know, this year, the New York State legislature responded to our pleas by passing, with a remarkable degree of unanimity, the MTA ½ Fare Fairness Bill of 1999 to close the legal loophole that had cultivated discrimination in New York

City's public transportation system. The Governor, recognizing that his proposed \$200 million in new mental health funding will make a greater difference in people's lives if they are able to reach their appointments and go to the services available to them, signed the bill into law.

At no point in the legislative discussions of the bill did anyone suggest that this bill should apply only to the LIRR and Metro North. At no point during the debate over this bill did the MTA step forward to warn that there was a 'technical deficiency' in the bill language that would prohibit you from extending half fare benefits to New York City residents. Yet, now that the law has passed, that is exactly what is claimed.

We want to work with you. We think of you as partners rather than adversaries. Surely, no member of this Board would deliberately discriminate against people with mental illness. We know that you are people of good faith and good conscience and that is why I am here to appeal to you one more time to do the right thing.

I ask you to please implement the law as it was intended. End the discrimination against people with psychiatric disabilities in the New York City Transit system.