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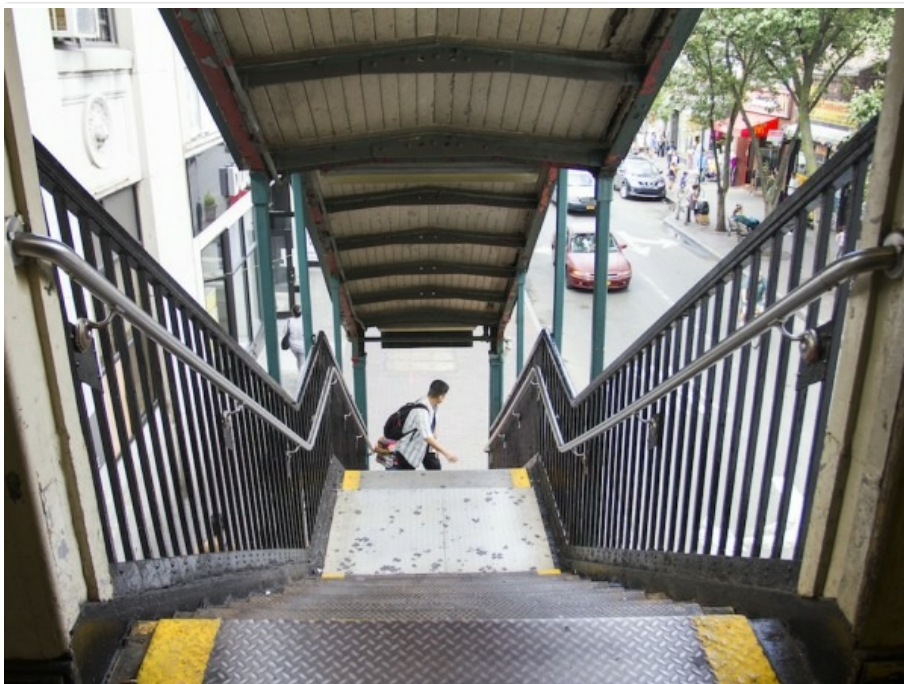
QUEENS

October 22, 2014

The Hard Climb to the 7 Train

The lack of elevators and escalators on the line dates back to when it was built, but knowing the history doesn't make it any easier.

by [Marissa Armas](#)



A man helps a woman with a child up the stairs at the 82nd St. Station in Jackson Heights (Marissa Armas/ NY City Lens).

For many New Yorkers, using the subway system is a godsend, but for Berenice Sandoval, a Jackson Heights resident, it's one of the most difficult tasks of her day.

"It's hard," Sandoval said. Sometimes she is simply forced to wait at the bottom of a staircase, she said, for somebody to help her. "If no one comes, I have to fold the stroller and grab the kid by his hand, and walk up the stairs," Sandoval said. She is just one of many who have a hard time catching the 7 train.

In fact, most people with young children in the Jackson Heights community are left waiting at the bottom of the stairs for someone to help carry their strollers up the stairs, or lug the child and a stroller up flights of stairs alone. The elderly grasp the handrails tightly, walking stair by stair and taking twice as much time as others to get up and down. And for the disabled, the 7 line creates a special hardship. Long stairways are a problem for this community because not everyone is young and agile, and not everyone travels without kids.

Subway accessibility is an ongoing problem throughout the city, an issue New Yorkers know all too well. The 7 train is particularly difficult for many people in Queens because most of its stations are elevated, and most of them lack elevators or escalators. Thousands are affected by the problem, an issue that experts say dates back to the assembly of the 7 line.

The 7 train operates from Times Square in Midtown Manhattan to Main Street in Flushing.

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Out of the train's 21 stops, only eight of them have elevators or escalators. After a visit to the 82nd Street Subway station in Jackson Heights, NYCitylens observed about 30 individuals in need of an elevator or escalator between noon and 1 p.m. On that same day, from 4:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m., 29 people had such a need. That's roughly 30 people per hour who are in need of elevator or escalator accessibility, up to some 240 people in an eight-hour span on a busy day.

According to Queens Community Board 3, if a station doesn't have accessibility for wheelchairs, strollers, and so fourth, commuters have to travel to a different stop, sometimes a 20-minute walk away. "If you walk around subways, there's usually a huge number of people who are dependent on elevators," said Joe Rappaport, a spokesperson for the Taxis For All Campaign, a coalition of disability-rights groups. "Virtually all of us at some point will have a need for an elevator."

And even if a stop has one, there is no guarantee it is working. Queens Community Board 3, in its Statement of District Needs, reports that of the elevators and escalators available, many of them often break down, sometimes twice a day. The 74th Street Station has been notorious for having malfunctioning escalators. In August, the MTA began construction at the 74th Street Station to replace existing elevators, as part of the 2015-2019 Capital Program. The \$11 million restoration is supposed to be completed in January of 2015. When asked how many of the 7 line's elevators and escalators are beyond their useful lives, a spokesperson for the MTA said they don't track them by line. "We periodically publish statuses on escalators and elevators in the transit committee books that are released monthly, before our board meetings," the MTA said.

The lack of accessibility to the elevated 7 train isn't a new problem. This is a problem that the Queens community has been fighting since the line was constructed.

The first stops of the 7 line were built in 1915. According to the MTA, much of the 7 line is elevated because the two divisions that operated it, the Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) Company and the Brooklyn Rapid Transit Company (BRT), specialized in elevated railroads. The IRT and the BRT continued to build on this line up until 1928. The elevated platforms are 12 feet high, with 27 steps.

Robert Paaswell, a professor of civil engineering and mass transit at CUNY, said that when the 7 line was built, accessibility wasn't considered an issue. Even today, Paaswell argues, the MTA only cares about elevator and escalator accessibility at critical stations, such as the Times Square station. The MTA said the stations with elevators and escalators are chosen based on need, ridership, and traffic.

"The real issue is funding. The MTA is underfunded," Paaswell said. According to Paaswell, a lot of people are oblivious to how much it costs to make improvements, such as replacing elevators or escalators and building new ones, to these outdated stations. The MTA said costs for improvements depend on what improvements are required.

David King, a professor of urban planning at Columbia, agrees with Paaswell when it comes to finances for the MTA. King said access to the subways has been an ongoing problem in NYC for several years, and it's expensive to build new elevators and escalators in stations that were built years ago. King said that adding elevators and escalators to elevated stations usually amounts to adding 2-4 elevators per station: one for each side or two for each side.

According to King, it's expensive to build new elevators and escalators because engineers have to look at street space and how the station was originally constructed. Multiple elevators essentially mean more money from the MTA, which the MTA's budget doesn't necessarily allow for. King also said that subway maintenance should not just be left up to the MTA to finance. "The state should step in. This burden should not be placed on just the MTA," King said.

Kate Contino, a coordinator for the Straphangers Campaign, an advocate for commuters, said that thinking about the infrastructure of the station is important because many of the elevators and escalators in stations were retrofitted. That means that different stations have different elevators, which essentially means different mechanics and tools are required to fix each one.

There are other ways to increase access, however. Disabled in Action is one of the major advocacy groups fighting for equal rights for people with disabilities. Edith Prentiss, vice



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passenger on Metro-
North train said.
"People were jumping
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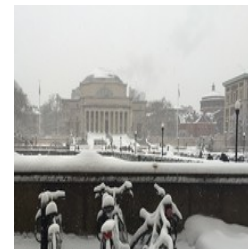
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president of Disabled in Action and a longtime advocate for the disabled community, said that the MTA should think out of the box when it comes to accessibility. Prentiss said that installing ramps would be ideal because they “don’t break down.” Prentiss added that very few stations actually have ramps, but she’s found them to be efficient.

Rappaport, of the Taxis for All Campaign, believes that the 1 train may be worse than the 7 train. “The 1 train is completely inaccessible by subway for wheelchair users and others who have mobility problems,” Rappaport said. “Even if the rest of the line had elevators, which it doesn’t, it’d still be inaccessible.” The 1 line has 31 stops and only nine of the stops are accessible. That means that the 7 line has its fair share of elevators and escalators, and this problem seems to affect the entire subway system.


According to David King, the MTA reached an agreement with the government to make a certain amount of stations ADA compliant, to satisfy the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The agreement forced the MTA to make at least 100 of its subway stations fully ADA compliant by 2020.

The MTA said it has completed 82 elevators and escalators (though according to Prentiss, only 80 are functioning). The MTA said the rest are in various stages of planning, design work, or construction. “On top of that, NYCT has retrofitted 21 other stations where wheelchair customers have access from the street level to the subway platform level, and plan to retrofit more as funding allows,” the MTA said.

The MTA’s latest capital program has not been approved by the state. The MTA said that from now until the spring when the state budget is enacted, the MTA and state legislators are currently discussing where they can find funding for the plan or funding to prioritize individual projects.

The MTA said that its goal is to provide door-to-door service to eligible customers to destinations that are within the service area covered by MTA buses and subways. Sandoval said she hopes to see easier access in Queens in the future. “It would make things a lot easier,” she said.


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 **TAGS:** 7 train, 82nd St. Station, accessibility, BRT, disabled, Disabled In Action, Edith Prentiss, flushing, IRT, Jackson Heights, mta, New York, Queens, Straphangers Campaign, Strollers, subway, Taxis For All Campaign, Transportation

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