

Reducing train deaths is goal of new program



COMPTON, CA - AUGUST 21: Train crossing violators on August 21, 2013 at Willowbrook Blue Line Station in Los Angeles, California. (Photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Transit Authority)

By [Steve Scauzillo](#), San Gabriel Valley Tribune

September 4, 2013

LOS ANGELES >> A 25-year-old La Mirada driver felt trapped as her car sat on the train tracks at Rosecrans and Marquardt avenues in Santa Fe Springs. As the railroad arms came down, the driver panicked. The woman attempted a U-turn but the freight train was simply traveling too fast.

The woman, not named, died on impact, one of many train track fatalities in Southern California this year, the same type that Metro and Metrolink are trying to prevent by raising awareness this month, dubbed Rail Safety Month by the state Legislature.

Whether they are vehicles negotiating a grade crossing, pedestrians who stumble into an oncoming train, or a person committing suicide, the issue of train safety is becoming more important as Southern California experiences additional freight trains moving goods from the ports and adds new passenger lines in South L.A. the Westside, and the foothills of the San Gabriel Valley.

All told, more people and more drivers will be exposed to trains in the next five years, a potential safety disaster, especially in a region whose populace is more familiar with cars and freeways than locomotives and rails.

“Remember, a train operator can’t turn out of the way,” explained Jeff Lustgarten, spokesman for Metrolink. “A train could take as much as a half mile to stop.”

California leads all states in the number of fatalities in highway-rail grade crossings, according to Metro and Metrolink. Many are from vehicles hit by Union Pacific trains, the largest railroad in the state.

The Alameda Corridor East Construction Authority’s CEO Mark Christoffels, speaking at a press conference Tuesday at Union Station, said the ports of L.A. and Long Beach will increase rail traffic 160 percent between now and 2020. The agency is attempting to make 39 train/road crossings safer with better gates, bells and lights and medians that prevent cars from turning onto the tracks.

The agency, with a \$1.4 billion budget, has plans to erect 22 grade separation projects in the county. The projects will allow freight trains to travel above or beneath roadway traffic. Projects are under construction in El Monte, San Gabriel and Industry.

The highest number of pedestrian deaths involving passenger trains has occurred along the Metro Blue Line, which runs from downtown L.A. to Long Beach. More than 100 people, both pedestrians and motorists, have been killed at Blue Line crossings since 1990, the most of any rail line in the country. From 1990 to 2002, the Blue Line led all trains in all cities with 61 fatalities.

Metro has installed four-quadrant gates along the Blue Line route which has helped stop cars from hitting trains. But Metro Chairwoman Diane DuBois said education is a key element in reducing deaths on Blue Line tracks.

Last year, the Blue Line reported eight fatalities from January to August. In the same period this year, fatalities have dropped to four, she said.

Some of those are suicides, something much harder to prevent, she said. Metro has been working with Didi Hirsh Mental Health Services, a nonprofit with locations from Glendale to Santa Monica. She said Metro workers report potential suicidal behavior to authorities and learn how to detect suicidal tendencies by working with counselors. They refer those whom they believe may be suicidal to counselors at the nonprofit group (1-877-727-4747).

Every time someone commits suicide on a train track, the emotional pain ripples out from the victim’s family and friends to train operators who witness the event but can’t prevent it.

“Many (train operators) have difficulties getting past those terrible experiences,” DuBois said.

Finally, Metro has hired 14 train safety ambassadors to cover the intersections along the Blue Line. They point out a pedestrian's unsafe behavior, such as running across a Blue Line track while the red lights and bells announce an oncoming train. If a citation is issued by a sheriff's deputy, the fine is \$370, said Fred Jackson, Metrolink safety officer.

Often, young people wearing ear buds and listening to music don't hear the engineer's horns, Jackson said. "It is like they are turning one of their senses off," he said. He urged anyone near train tracks to turn off phones and music and other distractions and obey traffic signs.

In July 2012, 14-year-old Mitch Sata was struck and killed by a Metrolink train traveling east at Glendora Avenue in unincorporated Covina. Authorities said he appeared to be wearing ear buds while listening to music. He did not hear the train.