Since the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been no higher priority for me than the health and safety of our employees. Toward that end, NJ TRANSIT is now offering COVID-19 testing to all employees – at the American Dream complex in East Rutherford and at Rowan University in South Jersey's Gloucester County. The ability to facilitate access to testing for employees will lead to quicker identification of cases, quicker treatment for those testing positive, and immediate isolation, to prevent spread.

Another way we're working to protect employees is through an unprecedented effort to purchase and distribute personal protective equipment (PPE). To date, we have ordered more than two million masks, and have more than 900,000 masks in stock. We have nearly 50,000 bottles of hand sanitizer, and have ordered more than two million pairs of gloves, with about 650,000 pairs in stock. We are also working to increase social distancing. On April 20th, we implemented a modified weekday bus schedule that added nearly 2,500 extra trips compared to the previous schedule, supporting essential travel and added capacity. And on Sunday, May 3rd, we began closing Newark Penn Station overnight from 11 p.m. until 4:30 a.m., to facilitate enhanced cleaning. This follows – and is coordinated with – the overnight closure of New York Penn Station and the New York City subway system.

While still in the throes of the COVID-19 response, we’ve begun to turn our attention to recovery and ramp-up post-COVID-19. We’re dubbing the return of regular service: “NJ TRANSIT: Your Ride to Recovery.” We’re working closely with the MTA, PATH, SEPTA, and Amtrak to ensure we’re all coordinated in terms of service restoration. The mobilization of an internal committee is underway and will be responsible for developing recommendations to produce a structured and deliberative return-to-work plan for all NJ TRANSIT employees.

We’re looking at recovery not only as it relates to service, but also how NJ TRANSIT will serve the state’s economic recovery through a robust capital program. For example, today we’re seeking Board approval to award the first of three major contracts to remove and replace the Raritan River Bridge, while 18 additional projects are now underway. In addition – pending a Full Funding Grant Agreement from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) – we are close to entering the engineering phase for our Portal North Bridge project. On the bus side of our capital program, two weeks ago we put into revenue service the first of 25 additional new articulated buses, paid for with a $17 million grant awarded by the FTA. The bus increases on-board capacity by more than 65 percent and allows for greater social distancing. Retiring older buses also increases mechanical reliability and helps better serve customers with improved on-time performance and new customer amenities.

Another step in our march to recovery was the restoration of service at two Hudson-Bergen Light Rail stations on the West Side Avenue Branch, following the completion of required utility work by the Jersey City Municipal Utilities Authority. On April 25th, the MLK Drive and Garfield Avenue stations reopened for scheduled light rail service. We are also installing new and improved ticket vending machines (TVM) at fourteen locations systemwide, replacing older machines at bus, light rail, and rail stations. The new TVMs are faster, easier to use, and fully ADA accessible. Customers can pay with a phone, and will no longer need to insert debit or credit cards. We will assess the performance of these new TVMs before continuing the rollout them out systemwide.

In closing, I want to acknowledge all the employees we’ve lost to this horrible pandemic. To date, nine NJ TRANSIT employees have passed away due to confirmed COVID-19-related complications. These employees are so much more than statistics. They were real people with families and loved ones, and they were valued members of the NJ TRANSIT family. I can’t say it enough – I truly appreciate all the men and women of NJ TRANSIT who continue to keep our region moving for essential travel.