

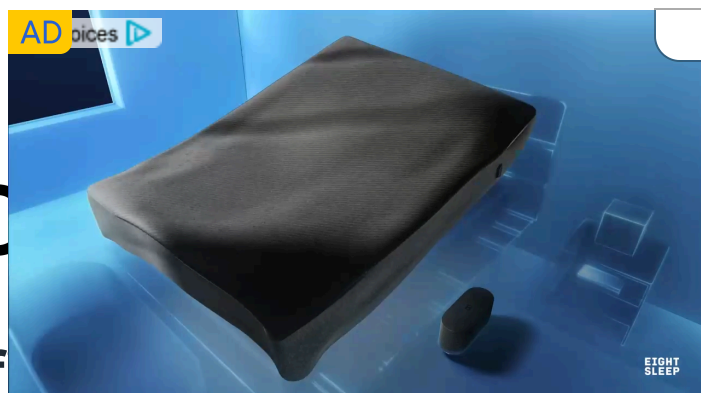
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Years of CATS security staff Iryna Zarutskya's stabbing

By **Amber Gaudet**

October 16, 2025 5:30 AM  Gift Article



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The Charlotte Area Transit System has faced stiff criticism following the fatal stabbing of 23-year-old Ukrainian refugee Iryna Zarutska on the Blue Line in August.

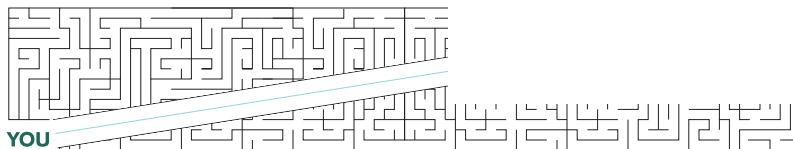
A Sept. 30 [“special report”](#) from the state auditor’s office accused the city of recently allowing security staffing gaps that left people using the transit system vulnerable at the time Zarutska was killed. It suggests that a focus on meeting diversity goals when selecting contractors for the contract — one with fewer armed officers — was a key factor in the agreement, which ended in 2023.

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Public records, however, show that that security staffing shortages prompted Charlotte officials' decision to end at least one transit security contract in 2023. It's also clear that city leaders have been told about the need to address security officer vacancies for at least five years.



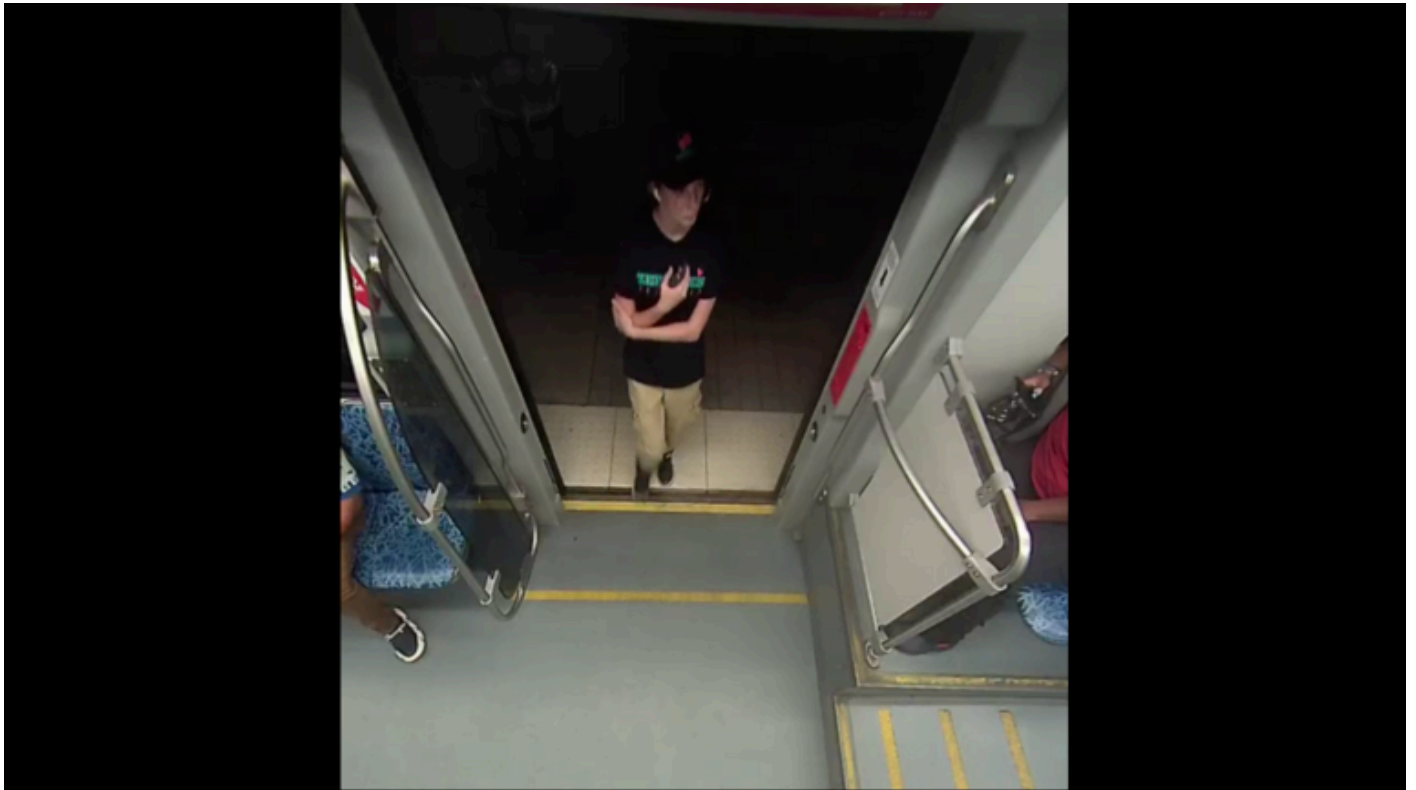
Evidence that city officials received multiple warnings about staffing shortages include:

- **2020:** A former CATS security provider, Allied Universal, asked CATS officials to raise contractor wages to address shortages as early as 2020, a company executive told the Charlotte City Council in 2023.
- **2022:** Allied Universal submitted a 13-page report to officials in November 2022 outlining security staffing challenges and the need to raise pay, company executive Charlie Bohnenberger said in 2023.
- **2023:** Allied Universal temporarily stopped placing security personnel on city buses due to staffing shortages, interim CATS CEO Brent Cagle [said in May 2023](#) after a shootout between a passenger and driver.

The Charlotte Area Transit System declined to make interim CEO Cagle available for an interview and did not directly address how it responded to Allied's concerns.

Security vacancies remain despite increased spending

CATS, established in 2000 as a division of the City of Charlotte, is one of the largest transit systems in the Southeast. It operates a fleet of 173 fixed-route buses at peak demand and seven-day-a-week light rail service along a 20-mile route.  



Iryna Zarutka boards a Charlotte Lynx Blue Line car at around 9:45 p.m. on Aug. 22 in this screenshot of footage released to media outlets. Zarutka was fatally stabbed on her way home from work. *Charlotte Area Transit System*

As occurred after Zarutka was stabbed on a Blue Line car while on her way home from work, debates over security staffing have flared previously after violence on city buses and light rail.



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Multiple bus drivers have been [shot](#) over the past several years — one fatally. Pedestrians and drivers have [shot at CATS buses](#) and one person was hospitalized

after a [stabbing on the Gold Line](#). In at least one case, a bus driver [shot a passenger](#). Violence against CATS operators reached a four-year high in 2021, The Charlotte Observer [reported in 2023](#).

Charlotte officials increased spending on CATS security from \$5.9 million in 2022 to \$18.4 million in 2025. The next year a contract with Professional Police Services, CATS' current security provider, increased the total number of security positions to 219, from as few as 108 previously, according to the auditor's report.

Yet the number of armed officers declined from as many as 88 in a 2018 contract to 39 in the current contract, the state auditor's report emphasizes.

And what was on paper didn't always match what occurred on CATS buses or light rail cars.



Michael Bermudez drove from Spartanburg, S.C. to attend a Sept. 22 memorial service for Iryna Zarutska. The young woman's death prompted questions about the adequacy of Charlotte Area Transit System security. JEFF SINER jsiner@charlotteobserver.com

Professional Police Services — also known as Professional Security Services — had only 186 of 219 contracted positions filled 12 days after Zarutsky was killed, with the city reporting more security on the job since then.

CATS security contracts show the company took on additional security responsibilities in 2024. In December, CATS leadership transitioned armed security services to PPS after ending its relationship with another contractor, Strategic Security Corporation. PPS was already handling unarmed security for CATS.

A PPS executive declined to comment for this story. His company was eight months into the process of staffing the additional positions after Zarutsky's death.



Persistent problems with security

Long before the current shortfall, a former security provider was struggling to fill its security positions. Cagle [has said](#) that Allied, the previous security provider, in 2023 due to staffing shortages.

In the company's defense, Allied had "repeatedly engaged CATS leadership" about staffing concerns since 2020, company executive Charlie Bohnenberger told the Charlotte City Council in April 2023.



Mayor Vi Lyles speaks during a press conference to announce new security enhancements being implemented throughout CATS on Oct. 3. KHADEJEH NIKOUYEH Knikouyeh@charlotteobserver.com

“In November we provided a 13-page report, providing in great detail wage analysis from multiple independent sources showing CATS that in order to address the police staffing shortages, we need to do wage adjustments,” Bohnenberger said.



Allied officials did not respond to multiple requests for an interview. The Charlotte Observer on Oct. 1 requested a copy of the 2022 report and other public documents from city officials but has not received them.

When asked why the security staffing shortfalls have persisted, longtime Charlotte City Council member Ed Driggs said multiple problems with CATS came to light around 2022, when Allied said their report was submitted.

“Security wasn’t the only thing that wasn’t working as well as it should have,” said Driggs, a member of the city council since 2013 who now chairs its Transportation, Planning and Development Committee.

The decision to triple investment in CATS security since then was city leaders’ attempt to address gaps, Driggs said. Officials often have to make difficult decisions about where to allocate funds with so many competing priorities, Driggs said. And while the goal is zero crime, it may not be realistic.

“We do have a responsibility as council to run a lean organization — we cannot be kind of extravagant in terms of spending 10 times as much money in order to achieve a 20% reduction in incidents on the trains,” Driggs said.



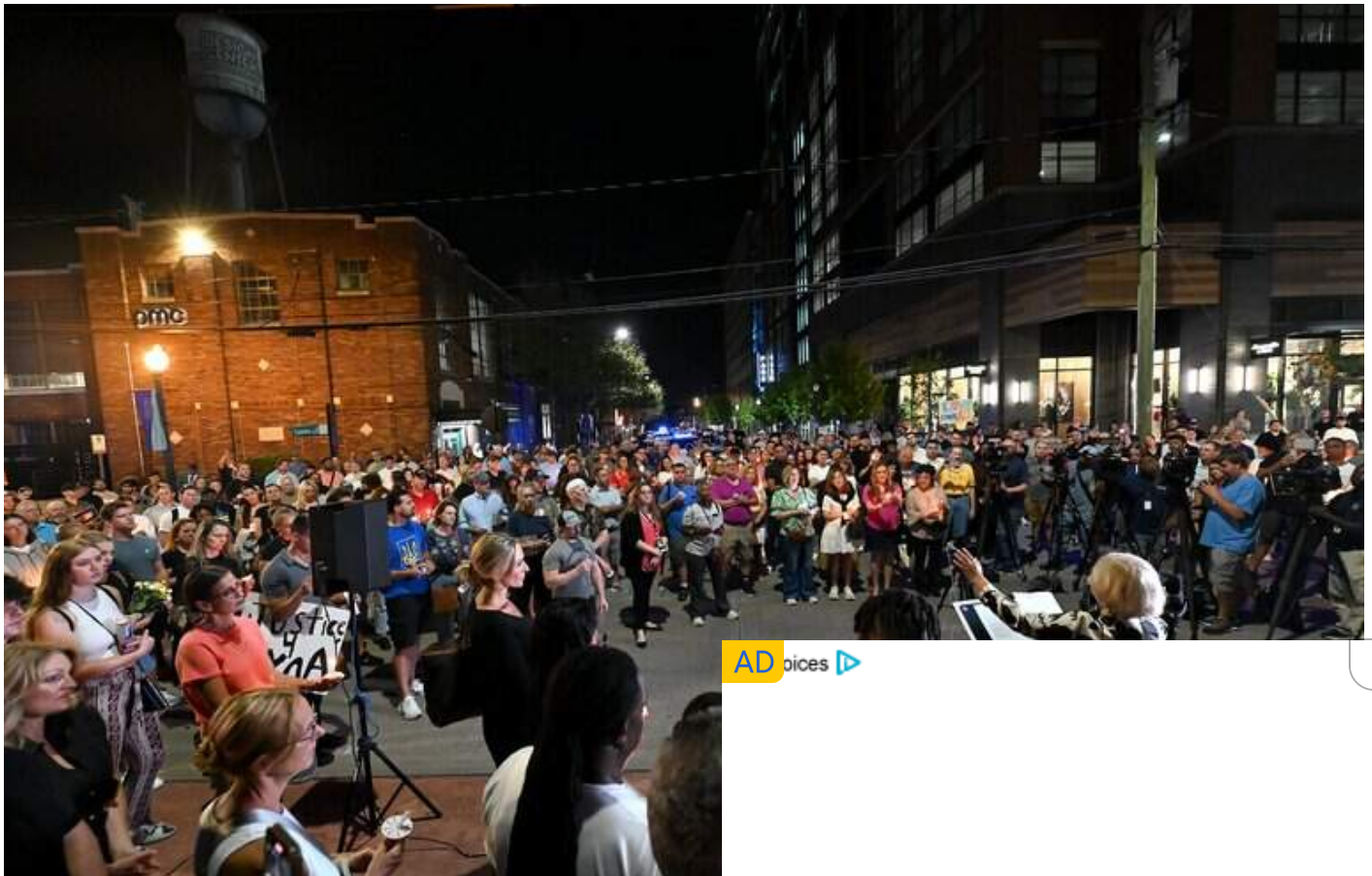
Low wages have long plagued the private security sector, according to a 2025 [analysis of federal data](#) by the Center for American Progress. Turnover rates are

more than 50% annually across the industry, the report found.

Today, unarmed transit security officers make \$30.96 per hour, according to CATS' contract with Professional Police Services. Armed security guards make \$42 per hour and company police officers make \$46.97 per hour. Sergeants and captains are paid at higher rates.

Stepped up protective efforts

CATS officials did not respond to questions about previous struggles with security staffing. But they shared public documents listing recent security improvements.



Tatyana Thulien sings Amazing Grace during a memorial service for
SINER jsiner@charlotteobserver.com

They include the addition of off-duty Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department officers to supplement security contractors. PA announcements that started on Sept. 18 reminding passengers that fare is required. And ramped-up, random

“fare blitzes” at Blue Line stations that began around the same time and are intended to make sure more passengers are paying for their rides.

Transit security officers are now using bikes and utility terrain vehicles for patrols along the Blue Line, Charlotte officials [announced during the Oct. 3 news conference](#). That increases accessibility to hard-to-reach platforms, like those in Uptown and South End, Cagle said.

“PSS has around 200 officers currently employed and has deployed officers to fully staff the Blue Line,” CATS spokesperson Brett Baldeck said in an emailed statement. “Recruitment efforts are ongoing to bring additional staffing up to the 219 outlined in the security contract. We continue the addition of off-duty CMPD officers to supplement the work of our already deployed officers.”

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Looking ahead

CATS plans within the next year to determine the number of transit police officers, police officers and fare enforcement officers needed for operations, according to CATS September 2026 report.

The transit system will then “work toward budgeting and/or obtaining funding to supply the resources identified,” the report states.

Some Charlotte leaders say continued investment in the system will be critical. That includes passage of a 1% transportation sales tax referendum that voters will weigh in on in November.

It [would earmark](#) \$20 billion for the region's transportation system over the next 30 years, allowing for the expansion of light rail and more.

Those dollars would allow CATS to become a transit agency with its own sworn police force, according to the security plan.

A police chief for the department would be tasked with conducting a planning study to determine "the most effective structure and size" of the transit police department, according to CATS' September 2025 security and safety plan. Deployment of the force could take 18 to 24 months.



"We have an ongoing effort that we had been looking at for some time, and we want to consider all the possibilities

EDITOR'S NOTE: Do you have information about safety on the system's buses or light rail? If yes, contact Charlotte Observer reporter Amanda Gaudet at agaudet@charlotteobserver.com.

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