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Engineer
in
Hoboken
Train
Crash
Had
Undiagnosed
Sleep
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Lawyer
Says

By EMMA G. FITZSIMMONS NOV. 16, 2016

The engineer of a New Jersey Transit train that crashed into Hoboken Terminal in September had an undiagnosed sleep disorder, his lawyer said on Wednesday.

The engineer, Thomas Gallagher, recently learned he had severe sleep apnea, according to his lawyer, Jack Arseneault. The test results were sent to federal officials on Oct. 31, he said.

Mr. Gallagher, who told officials he did not remember the crash, believed the diagnosis might explain what happened, his lawyer said.

“It made sense to him because of his experience with the crash that he did everything that he would normally do,” Mr. Arseneault said in an interview. “He checked his speed, blew the whistle, rang the bell, and the next thing he knew he was on the floor.”

The train slammed into the station during the busy morning commute, killing one person and injuring more than 100 others. Federal officials have said the train suddenly accelerated right before the crash.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the accident and has not determined the cause. But Mr. Gallagher’s diagnosis echoed an earlier Metro-North Railroad crash in 2013, in which the engineer was found to have undiagnosed sleep apnea. The condition involves pauses in breathing or shallow breaths, which can disrupt sleep and cause excessive daytime sleepiness, according to the National Institutes of Health.

On Wednesday evening, the Federal Railroad Administration said it would soon issue a safety advisory to push railroads to tackle worker fatigue and to install cameras in locomotives. Officials have “long believed it is important for railroads to address worker fatigue more aggressively,” Matthew Lehner, a spokesman for the railroad administration, said.

New Jersey Transit released a statement saying it could not discuss the details of the crash, but that the agency had a sleep apnea screening program. Officials were not authorized to discuss employees’ medical information, the statement said.

A spokesman for the federal safety board, Eric Weiss, said he could not confirm whether the engineer had sleep apnea. He said the agency examines the

medical fitness of workers as part of accident investigations, including whether an undiagnosed condition could have impaired a worker.

Senator Robert Menendez, Democrat of New Jersey, said he had been briefed by the safety board and the railroad administration about the Hoboken investigation on Wednesday. If the train's engineer had a chronic condition that contributed to the crash, he said in a statement, it would reinforce the need for a safety technology, known as positive train control, that can automatically stop or slow a speeding train.

New Jersey Transit gave Mr. Gallagher a physical exam in July and declared him fit for duty, Mr. Arseneault said. But the engineer was an "extremely heavy man" with a large neck circumference, he said.

"I believe common sense indicates that a person like that could be subject to suffering from adult sleep apnea," Mr. Arseneault said.

In the 2013 Metro-North crash, which killed four people, the safety board found that the engineer had fallen asleep as a result of the undiagnosed condition. The engineer, William Rockefeller, learned he had the condition after the crash, prompting additional testing of railroad workers.

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