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Focus in CTA crash falls on operator fatigue, braking system

March 24, 2014 | By Peter Nickeas, Lolly Bowean, Richard Wronski and Kim Geiger | Tribune reporters

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Federal investigators will focus on whether a CTA train operator fell asleep at the controls and if an automatic braking system was working properly as they seek to pinpoint the cause of a spectacular crash Monday that left a Blue Line car perched atop an escalator.

The operator may have fallen asleep shortly before her train smashed through a “bumping post” at the end of the track at O’Hare International Airport just before 3 a.m., according to a transit union representative.

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The CTA employee, whose name has not been released, said after the crash that she was tired, said Robert Kelly, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 308.

“I can confirm that she was extremely tired,” Kelly said.

“Indications are she might have dozed off.”

Other crucial issues that will come under sharp focus in the inquiry include whether the train was speeding as it entered the station at the airport and whether the safety control system was working.

The train was traveling with such momentum that it smashed through a barrier designed to stop trains at the end of the line, jumped the platform and climbed the escalator.

More than 30 people were hurt, though none of the injuries was considered life-threatening, officials said. Had the incident occurred at any time other than the middle of the night, scores could have been killed or injured, experts said.

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Blue Line service to the airport will be halted until authorities finish studying the crash site and decide how to remove the wreckage. The CTA late Monday declined to say when the station might reopen.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating the incident, which temporarily halted commuter rail service to one of the country's busiest airports.

The CTA is shuttling passengers to O'Hare from the nearby Rosemont stop for the time being.

The front car of the eight-car train remained wedged atop the escalator late Monday.

“The train is not going to go anywhere for the foreseeable future,” said Tim DePaepe, an NTSB railroad accident investigator. “We need to examine the train and the position it's in prior to its movement.”

The NTSB will also try to determine how fast the train was going when the crash occurred.

Officials said the train did not carry an event data recorder. Typically, the CTA's older-model 2600 Series cars, like the ones in Monday's crash, do not have event recorders.

However, the train did have an outward-facing video system, DePaepe said, and officials are reviewing the recording and several others. They also are examining the signals and tracks to see if there were problems or malfunctions.

The crash happened about 2:50 a.m., one of the station's lightest traffic times.

“I heard a boom and when I got off the train, the train was all the way up the escalator. It's a wreck,” Denise Adams, who was riding toward the back of the train, told reporters.

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“It was a lot of panic because it was hard to get people off the train.”

CTA President Forrest Claypool said safety is the agency's top priority.

“We run half a million train trips a year,” he said. “So when something like this happens, we want to work closely with our engineers and theirs (the NTSB) to get to the very bottom of this as fast as we can.”

Kelly speculated that the bumping post acted as a catapult, shooting the train off the track. The impact could have caused the operator's hand to push forward on the lever that sends power to the train, surging it forward and launching it, he said.

“I think what happened is, when she hit the post, the hand went up, whether she was caught off guard, whatever it was,” Kelly said at a news conference.

The train operator has been employed with CTA for about a year, Kelly said. She “works a lot of overtime,” he said, but she had been off for about 17 hours before starting her overnight shift, which began at 8 p.m. Sunday.

“So she had an ample amount of time to be off that day,” Kelly said.

“I do know she works a lot, as a lot of our members do.”

After the crash, she immediately got out of the train and started checking on passengers, Kelly said. She was later treated for a leg injury but was released from a hospital Monday.

The train operator had not yet been interviewed by the NTSB, DePaepe said. Federal

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authorities will look into her work schedule, her activities in the week leading up to the crash and her medical background as part of their investigation, DePaepe said. She also will undergo routine drug and alcohol testing.

Kelly said he did not believe that the train operator was speeding when she entered the station.

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