Metra races to restore MDW line

The scene was chaotic at 5:30 a.m. on Nov. 3. A long CN freight train had derailed, right where the CN tracks cross the Metra Milwaukee West Line tracks near Bartlett. Freight rail cars were up-ended, flipped over and crushed, and some were on fire. Rails from several different sets of tracks were ripped up and twisted amid the derailed cars. The intersection was completely blocked by a smoking mass of debris, and service on the Milwaukee West was crippled, with seven of nine train sets caught on the wrong side of the accident in our yard in Elgin.

And yet, less than 24 hours later, our trains were rolling out of the yard and through the intersection to begin serving the line’s 12,000 passengers again.

To make that happen, a lot of hands pitched in – from Metra and from a variety of other agencies. Police and fire departments from Bartlett, Elgin and nearby communities quickly and effectively contained the scene and enabled the cleanup to proceed rapidly. We worked closely with CN to get the debris untangled and removed from the Metra right-of-way. Other state and federal agencies assisted.

But the accident presented some unique challenges for Metra, and we had to scramble to overcome them. First, we had to address the disruption of service and run whatever trains and buses we could. We had to plan for the resumption of at least partial service and keep our riders as informed as possible.

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Alerts kept riders up to date

The disruption of Milwaukee West Line service caused by the derailment of a CN train demonstrated why it’s so important that our riders sign up to receive e-mail alerts.

In the 24-hour period after the accident, Metra sent about 90 separate alerts to Milwaukee West riders, notifying them about the disruption of service and updating them about our plans for resuming service at every point along the way. The information also was updated frequently on our website, www.metrarail.com.

Signing up to receive the alerts is simple. Just go to our website, click on the “Sign Up for My Metra” link and follow the easy steps. Or, if you have a smartphone, download a QR-reader app and scan the code at the right. You’ll be routed to our “My Metra” signup page.

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Service restored in less than a day

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formed as possible. And we had to decide the best way to restore at least one track through or past the accident scene – and since time was of the essence – begin preparations to do that before the debris was cleared.

The work began right after the derailment, Don Orseno, Metra’s Chief Transportation Officer, said he knew Metra had a major problem on its hands as soon as he heard the derailment happened at what is known as the Spaulding Crossing. That crossing is between the Milwaukee West’s overnight storage yard in Elgin to the west and most of the rest of the line to the east. With that intersection blocked, Orseno knew that Metra would be unable to run most trains on the line.

In the early morning hours following the accident, key executive and media relations personnel put together a communications plan to try and provide all customers with Metra E-Alerts and Twitter information that would save them a trip to their station and allow them to immediately determine an alternate way to get to work that day.

Soon thereafter, Metra’s top executives convened in our GPS conference room downtown, which serves as our emergency operations center. That group eventually included Alex Clifford, Metra CEO; George Hardwidge, Deputy Executive Director; Orseno; Joe Lorenzini, Chief Engineering Director; Marty Ryan, Chief Mechanical Officer; Sharon Austin, Senior Division Director, Customer Affairs; James Sanford, Metra Police Chief; members of our web, media relations and customer communications teams and others.

The first priority was to do what we could do to serve riders of the Milwaukee West, and the main responsibility for determin-