

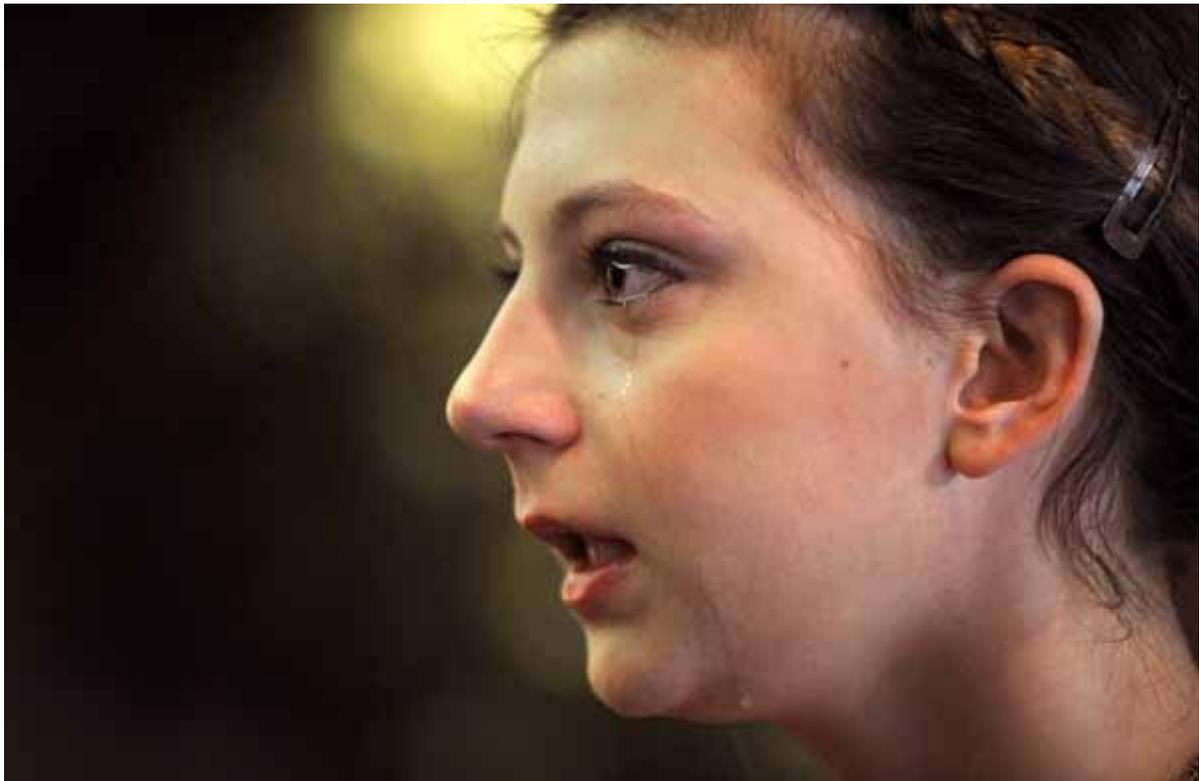
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Metrolink crash families share anger, tears

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A tear runs down MacKenzie Souser's cheek as she remembers her father, Doyle Souser, who was killed in the 2008 Metrolink crash in Chatsworth, CA. Souser joined family members and other victims of the crash for a private meeting to share their personal stories with company executives from Veolia, the company who employed the train engineer. (Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer)



MacKenzie Souser wipes away tears as she remembers her father, Doyle Souser, who was killed in...



SIMI VALLEY - Loved ones of those killed as well as of survivors on Monday told a congressman and executives of the company that has accepted liability for the crash, moving accounts of how the 2008 Metrolink catastrophe in Chatsworth destroyed their lives and families.

"This is about putting a face on the devastation - so that they see who we are," said Claudia Souser of Camarillo, whose husband, Doyle, was among the 24 Metrolink commuters killed in one of the nation's worst train tragedies.

The crash in which the Metrolink commuter train slammed head-on into a Union Pacific freight train on Sept. 12, 2008, also injured 135 other riders.

"We're not just numbers," Souser said she told executives from Veolia Transportation, the company that provided the Metrolink train operator blamed by authorities for the crash.

"You're all wearing wedding rings. How would you feel if you woke up tomorrow and your spouse wasn't there? What would you do? How would you survive?"

Although Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Thousand Oaks, arranged the meeting and sat listening intently, the tearful, sometimes angry stories were directed at three Veolia executives that the congressman's office said attended the forum.

Federal investigators concluded the accident was caused by a train engineer who ran a red light while sending text messages on his cell phone. The engineer, Robert Sanchez, was killed along with 24 commuters.

Sanchez was an employee of Connex Railroad, which no longer has the contract to operate Metrolink trains. Connex is a subsidiary of Veolia, a French company that operates bus, rail and other services throughout North America.

Executives from Veolia sat in stony silence during the nearly two-hour meeting at Simi Valley City Hall, those inside observed.

Reporters were not allowed in the closed-door meeting that Gallegly said was part of the "hard ground rules (set) as conditions by Veolia for them to attend."

"One condition (was) that they would not answer questions, much to my chagrin," said Gallegly, whose district is home to many of the crash victims.

The lack of feedback led to frustrations among some of the several dozen survivors and loved ones attending. Most of them declined to speak to reporters.

But 15-year-old Mackenzie Souser was open about what she saw as the failure of Veolia executives to acknowledge their responsibility.

"My father was not the kind of man who would have not said anything," she said. "He always said, 'Do the right thing. Be honest. Take responsibility.'"

But Mackenzie's mom said she understood why Veolia officials did not want to comment.

"What can you say when you have all these people who are limping up there (to speak), who are hurting, who lost their dads and their husbands," she said. "They just listened, they did not respond. But you can read it in their faces. It was shocking to hear some of the stories."

Lawyers for the victims and their families said company attorneys likely had forbidden any public comments by Veolia officials given the ongoing litigation.

Earlier, U.S. District Judge George H. Wu gave final approval to a \$200 million fund to compensate survivors and relatives of those killed in the crash.

The offer equals the maximum liability under federal law for passenger train accidents and would be among the most costly rail disaster payouts in the country's history.

Wu's approval allows the case to move on to state court, where Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Peter D. Lichtman will decide how the money will be divided.

Attorney Mark O. Hiepler, who represents a number of the families in the case, said hearings on the division of the funds will likely run from March through June, with a final decision not expected until July.

Gallegly has introduced legislation that would retroactively increase the liability cap from \$200 million to \$275 million for accidents like the head-on collision in Chatsworth.

But the congressman said he fears the bill, like a similar one in the last session, will stall in the House.

Another survivor who spoke to reporters was Kumar Shankar, 66, of Simi Valley, whose injuries included broken ribs, a broken nose, a shattered shoulder, a punctured lung and nerve damage.

"I'm just so happy to be alive," he said tearfully. "I just got lucky, somebody was looking after me."

But Shankar said he was furious with Veolia officials for coming to the hearing and then not addressing the victims nor their families.

"They seem to think that they don't have to do anything because nobody can touch them," he said. "I just want them to do the right thing."

As she listened, Mackenzie Souser broke into tears.

"It just makes me think about my dad," she said. "Some day I want to marry a man who is just like him. But I've been robbed of having him walk me down the aisle."

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