The Wreck of Amtrak #188: Another Needless Tragedy

On May 15th, Amtrak Train #188 derailed at Frankfurt Junction, PA. The deadly wreck represents the latest tragedy in a series of high profile crashes in recent years. While the rail carriers, politicians and the media predictably want to blame “operator error”, there are many deep underlying factors that combined, contributed to this — and every — train wreck.

Every single time that an industrial accident occurs, it is very easy to say “someone messed up.” Well of course someone messed up! But it is way more complicated than that. Was it the engineer? Or perhaps the conductor? The dispatcher or perhaps the signal maintainer or maintenance-of-way foreman? Maybe the track inspector? Perhaps the trainee instructor or the rules examiner? It could have been the supervisor? Perhaps all of these individuals played some role or another in creating the background that would result in a train wreck.

We can choose to focus our attention on the individual; or we examine the institution, the structure, the framework, and the corporate culture within which the accident took place. RWU believes the way to a safer railroad is to “fix the hazards, not blame the victims.” As such, we focus on the latter.

Please see pages 4, 5 and 7 of this issue to gain a deeper understanding of this latest wreck, and a commonsense strategy to prevent such tragedies in the future.

Despite the finger pointing and the calls for in-cab cameras, the wreck of Amtrak Train #188 this past spring has once again revealed that underlying issues and hazards — some of which could have been fixed and/or ameliorated years ago — are ultimately to blame for the tragedy. See the full RWU editorial on what we can do to eliminate train wrecks on Page 7.