

Bus Operators in Crisis

The Steady Deterioration of One of Transit's Most Essential Jobs,
and How Agencies Can Turn Things Around



TransitCenter




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Design

Cause + Matter

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An increased rate of retirement coupled with struggles to recruit and retain new operators have played a key role in creating operator shortfalls. Even in the absence of a pandemic, transit agencies would be challenged by a lack of workers.

Across the country, an operator shortfall is throwing transit systems into crisis.

In Miami, a promising bus network redesign that would have dramatically increased transit access to jobs has been postponed because of a lack of operators. In Los Angeles, a shortfall of at least 600 operators at LA Metro is undercutting the recent bus network redesign's ability to improve transit access in Black and brown neighborhoods.

The crisis has spared few agencies. In a February 2022 APTA (American Public Transportation Association) survey of 117 transit agencies of all sizes, 71% reported that they have either had to cut service or delay service increases because of worker shortfalls.

More than nine in ten public transit agencies stated that they are having difficulty hiring new employees, and that bus operations positions are the most difficult to fill. And nearly two-thirds of transit agencies indicated that they are having difficulty retaining employees. Shortfalls are impacting agencies across the country, both big and small.

These service cuts and postponed expansions are hampering agency efforts to win back riders after significant losses during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of these service cuts are being disproportionately felt by the Black and brown riders who are the core users of transit systems across the country.

An increased rate of retirement coupled with struggles to recruit and retain new operators have played a key role in creating operator shortfalls. Even in the absence of a pandemic, transit agencies would be challenged by a lack of workers.

A key cause of operator shortfalls is the position's lack of attractiveness. While many agencies still offer a middle-class salary and good benefits for the position, the compensation does not support workers at the levels that it once did, particularly as housing and living costs in cities skyrocket.

At the same time, the job has become in many ways more difficult. Operator assaults have increased, rigid scheduling requirements make it difficult for junior operators and workers with child or eldercare responsibilities, and a lack of access to adequate facilities—both restrooms on route and break rooms at depots—exact a health toll on operators. Hiring processes are slow, as are opportunities for raises and advancement within agencies. As a result, many potential workers have decided to look elsewhere for employment, such as driving for transportation network companies, trucking, or for delivery companies.



To tackle operator shortfalls, job quality needs to be taken seriously by transit agencies and the transit industry. Operators are the backbone of the transit industry—they deserve better compensation, paths for advancement, and the opportunity to influence their working conditions. Agencies must also speed up hiring processes, introduce more flexibility into the job, improve operator facilities and amenities, and implement additional health and safety measures—both to attract new entrants and retain existing employees.

The shortfall would also benefit from a response at the federal level. The White House and USDOT (United States Department of Transportation) have done an exceptional job highlighting and developing solutions for the truck driver shortage. The transit worker shortfall should be getting the same level of attention. The millions of dollars from the IIJA (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act) currently flowing toward capital investments in new buses will be of little use if there aren't enough operators to drive them.

This brief provides an overview of how shortfalls are playing out at agencies across the country, outlines some of the structural barriers to retention and hiring, and issues recommendations for how agencies and USDOT can begin to address the crisis.

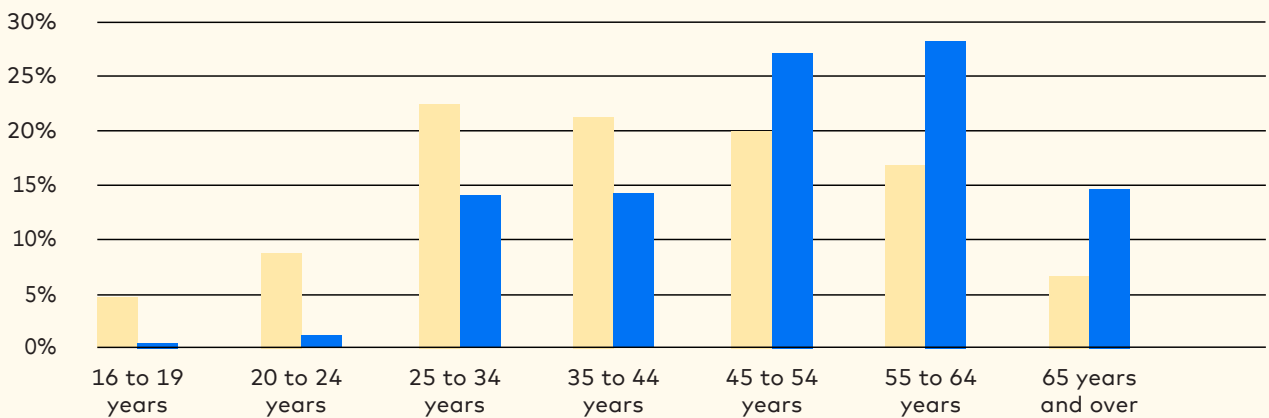
While the problem is multifaceted, many of the solutions are well within the control of relevant agencies. By taking steps to improve the quality of the job now, agencies can develop a stable, healthy, and satisfied 21st-century workforce.

- 1 Genova, D. and Rivera, J. (October 2018) "Collective Bargaining Agreement by and between The Regional Transportation District and the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1001 2018-2021." <https://www.rtd-denver.com/sites/default/files/files/2018-10/2018-labor-agreement.pdf>.
- 2 Bliss, Laura. (2018, June 28) "There's A Bus Driver Shortage. And No Wonder." Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-28/there-s-a-bus-driver-shortage-and-no-wonder>.
- 3 Metro Magazine Staff. (2018, March 5) "Ohio's TARTA cutting bus service due to driver shortage, OT." Metro Magazine. <https://www.metro-magazine.com/10033006/ohios-tarta-cutting-bus-service-due-to-driver-shortage-ot>
- 4 Ibid

Pre-pandemic Retirements Looming

While post-pandemic shortfalls have garnered much of the recent media coverage, the crisis began to emerge before the first case of COVID-19 was reported. In 2015, Denver, Colorado's RTD (Regional Transportation District) began experiencing and recognizing the operator shortfall, drafting a Memorandum of Understanding with ATU Local 1001 that provided premiums for mandated and volunteer hours being worked in order to meet RTD service requirements.¹ In 2018, Washington's King County Metro had an operator gap of more than 100 people.² That same year, the Toledo Area Regional Authority cut service by 6% due to operator shortfalls and the high costs of overtime.³ While the culprits can vary from agency to agency, two causes stick out: an increased number of retirements by an aging workforce and difficulties recruiting and retaining new workers.

Figure 1: Percentage of workforce by age



The transit workforce is, on average, older than the American workforce as a whole.⁴

- All workers
- Bus service and urban transit



5 United States Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. (2015 August) "Strengthening Skills, Training, and Career Pathways Across the Transportation Industry." https://s3.amazonaws.com/PCRN/docs/Strengthening_Skills_Training_and_Career_Pathways_Across_Transportation_Industry_Data_Report_091115.pdf

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. "2021 Household Data Annual Averages: 18b. Employed persons detailed by industry and age." <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18b.htm>

Before the pandemic, many agencies had begun to brace for a "silver tsunami," with large numbers of workers heading toward retirement. A 2015 report from the US Departments of Transportation, Labor, and Education found that nearly 63% of transit operators were over the age of 45.⁵ 72% of the 2015 workforce was projected to leave the occupation, either by moving to a new field or retiring by 2022.⁶ In combination with regular increases in workforce needs, 200,000 job vacancies are predicted.⁷

While many agencies responded by making efforts to improve their hiring and recruitment, shortfalls persist industry-wide. The issue will remain a top concern for years to come as the workforce continues to age. In 2021, the average transit operator is ten years older than the average American worker, 52.7 years old compared to 42.2.⁸

Some of the most transit-rich American cities are amongst the most expensive to live in, which means that many operators cannot afford to live in the cities they serve.

Difficulties Attracting New Entrants

While once a desirable and valued middle-class job, transit operations jobs have increasingly failed to keep pace with how work has evolved. Issues in compensation, safety, workplace culture, facilities, and flexibility make the job less appealing to new entrants and therefore are limiting the growth of the workforce.

Compensation

Finding new operators has been challenging for agencies. While it was once an attractive prospect, the appeal of the job has lessened, especially for younger workers. Pay is the primary culprit—operator pay has not kept up with the cost of living in most US cities. Experienced drivers can expect to earn what has been considered a middle-class salary, but not a middle-class lifestyle. Starting salaries for operators at agencies in the top seven ridership regions range between \$19.55 and \$29.61 per hour. LA Metro, SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority), and MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority) veer on the lower end, while San Francisco occupies the high end of the range.^{9,10} Some of the most transit-rich American cities are amongst the most expensive to live in, which means that many operators cannot afford to live in the cities they serve. In San Francisco, for example, only 42% of SFMTA

- 9 Houston Metro Careers. "Bus Operator- up to \$23.85/hour (Incentive pay up to \$4,000)" <https://jobs.ridemetro.org/job/Houston-Bus-Operator-Trainee-TX-77001/819980700/>
- 10 Los Angeles Metro. "Operators Earn \$3,000 Sign-on Bonus." <https://www.metro.net/about/careers/busoperator/>

Figure 2: Starting hourly salaries for operators in the top 7 transit ridership regions

Agency	Starting Salary (hourly)
MTA NYCT	\$25.49
LA Metro	\$20.49
MBTA (Boston)	\$21.13
SEPTA (Philadelphia)	\$19.55
CTA (Chicago)	\$24.27
SFMTA (San Francisco)	\$29.61
WMATA (DC)	\$25.51



- 11 Rodriguez, Joe Fitzgerald. (2019, April 3). "Many Muni drivers sleeping in their cars due to long commutes." San Francisco Examiner. https://www.sfxaminer.com/archives/many-muni-drivers-sleeping-in-their-cars-due-to-long-commutes/article_e996e8cb-5b3e-595d-9530-6dfd8f50668.html
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Los Angeles Metro Operations, Safety & Customer Experience Committee Meeting. (2022, May 19). "2022 Bus Operator Survey Update." <http://metro.legistar1.com/metro/attachments/c73a11f9-2811-46f0-badb-7b28d75b20f6.pdf>
- 14 MillNeil, Christian. (2021, December 15). "New MBTA Labor Deal Does Little to Improve Wages for New Bus Drivers." StreetsBlog Mass. <https://mass.streetsblog.org/2021/12/15/new-mbta-labor-agreement-does-little-to-improve-wages-for-new-bus-drivers/>
- 15 Ibid
- 16 Young, Colin A. (2016, December 19). "MBTA And Carmen's Union Agree To Contract Running Through 2021." State House Services via WBUR. <https://www.wbur.org/news/2016/12/19/mbta-carmens-union-new-contract>
- 17 See 14
- 18 Ibid

(San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency) bus operators live in the city as of April 2019.¹¹ Some operators face long commutes after their shift and, as a result, have taken to sleeping in their cars between shifts.¹² In a 2022 survey of 588 LA Metro bus operators, the highest percentage cited "low pay" as their biggest concern with the job, or why they would consider leaving.¹³

Operators often need years on the job before they can expect a better wage, making the job less attractive to new entrants. At the MBTA, for example, operators typically take four to five years to progress through the pay grades.¹⁴ This progression is very common—at the Philadelphia region's SEPTA, New York City's MTA, and Chicago's CTA, it takes 4–6 years to progress through pay grades. MBTA starting pay was reduced by a 2016 labor agreement from \$23.31 per hour to \$19.72.¹⁵ This also resulted in a greater difference between starting pay grades and the top levels. Previously, new hires would make 65% of the top tier; currently, they make 55%. The cuts to starting pay were justified by explaining that they would contribute to agency stability in the long term. "This agreement is about the long term, and about reinventing the T in a way that is sustainable financially, but that is also sustainable in terms of a labor-management context," then Massachusetts Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack told the State House New Service.¹⁶ A new labor agreement will raise wages for all MBTA operators and operator trainees but it will not address the rate of wage progression.^{17,18}

Combined with shortages in other industries and the private sector’s ability to more quickly adjust to changing trends, many current and potential employees have begun to look elsewhere for jobs. There is competition for workers with Commercial Driver’s Licenses (CDL, the license needed to drive buses in most municipalities in the country) as agencies compete for workers with delivery services like FedEx, UPS, and Amazon that have more flexibility in pay scales and bonus compensation.¹⁹

19 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/12/28/worker-shortages-public-transportation/>

Figure 3: New MBTA operator rates reduced by 15%

	% of Current Highest Tier	FY17 Progression	FY18 Progression	FY19 Progression	FY20 Progression	FY21 Progression	
NEW HIRE BUS DRIVER WAGES	STEP 1	55%	\$19.72	\$19.72	\$20.02	\$20.32	\$21.00
	STEP 2	60%	\$21.52	\$21.52	\$21.84	\$22.17	\$22.91
	STEP 3	65%	\$23.31	\$23.31	\$23.66	\$24.01	\$24.82
	STEP 4	75%	\$26.90	\$26.90	\$27.30	\$27.71	\$28.64
	STEP 5	100%	\$35.86	\$35.86	\$36.40	\$36.94	\$38.19
	% of Current Highest Tier	FY17 Progression	FY18 Progression	FY19 Progression	FY20 Progression	FY21 Progression	
STATUS QTO BUS DRIVER WAGES	STEP 1	65%	\$23.31	\$23.89	\$24.49	\$25.10	\$25.73
	STEP 2	75%	\$26.90	\$27.57	\$28.26	\$28.97	\$29.69
	STEP 3	85%	\$30.48	\$31.24	\$32.02	\$32.82	\$33.64
	STEP 4	90%	\$32.27	\$33.08	\$33.90	\$34.75	\$35.62
	STEP 5	100%	\$35.86	\$36.67	\$37.68	\$38.62	\$39.58

MBTA starting pay was reduced by a 2016 labor agreement from \$23.31 per hour to \$19.72. This also resulted in a greater difference between starting pay grades and the top levels.

Federal Transit Administration data shows that operator assaults per unlinked passenger trip increased fourfold from 2009 to 2020.

Transit agencies compete with the trucking industry in general, as both require CDLs. While trucking does require people to spend long periods of time on the road away from their homes, families, and friends, their only job is driving—truck drivers don't have to interact with the general public or collect fares, among other jobs.

Safety

In addition to declining pay in comparison to the cost of living, job safety has declined as well. Operators are increasingly assaulted on the job, which has decreased the desirability of the profession. Many potential employees are wary of, if not opposed to, taking a job that could involve hostile interactions with the public. FTA (Federal Transit Administration) data shows that operator assaults per unlinked passenger trip increased fourfold from 2009 to 2020.²⁰ Operators have a legitimate fear that their job could put them in harm's way. Though most of their interactions with the public are friendly, the job requires operators to intervene in potentially dangerous situations. Fare enforcement and intervening in onboard incidents can escalate and put operators in harm's way. Traffic incidents can also put operators in harm's way and subject them to abuse from angry drivers in cars and trucks. On the road, operators are often on their own should something occur. This is especially true during overnight runs on routes that serve less populated areas.

Ray Greaves, then the chair of the Amalgamated Transit Union's (ATU) New Jersey State Council, told CityLab in 2018 that "the bus driver is like the tax collector. They're demanding the fare, which puts them in a precarious situation."²¹ Verbal abuse and other nonphysical encounters between operators and passengers are common, leaving operators shaken and their mental health affected.²² "Every time that door opens, we don't know if we're going to get assaulted, spat on, cursed at. These are little traumas, mini-traumas, that happen every single day," explained John Courtney, head of the ATU Local 265 representing VTA (Valley Transit Authority) workers, to KQED News.²³

20 <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2021-02/Addressing-Operator-Assault-Webinar-20210224.pdf>

21 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-28/there-s-a-bus-driver-shortage-and-no-wonder>

22 <https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/news/transit-workers-face-growing-rate-of-assaults-theres-not-much-we-can-do/594959/>

23 <https://www.kqed.org/news/11889092/in-the-wake-of-the-vta-mass-shooting-a-cultural-shift-to-mental-health-for-bus-and-train-workers>

- 24 Who Rules Transit
- 25 <https://sanjosespotlight.com/vta-is-not-a-family-san-jose-transit-agency-seeks-help-to-fix-toxic-work-culture/>
- 26 <https://sanjosespotlight.com/silicon-valley-san-jose-amalgamated-transit-union-atu-objects-to-vta-work-culture-consultant-de-loitte-public-transportation/>
- 27 <https://sanjosespotlight.com/vta-is-not-a-family-san-jose-transit-agency-seeks-help-to-fix-toxic-work-culture/>
- 28 <https://www.kqed.org/news/11889092/in-the-wake-of-the-vta-mass-shooting-a-cultural-shift-to-mental-health-for-bus-and-train-workers>

Workplace Culture

The disconnect in who holds central office and leadership positions (majority white and male) and frontline staff (majority people of color), can impact people’s commitment to the job, their perception of advancement opportunities, and overall frustrations. TransitCenter’s *Who Rules Transit* provides an analysis of the underrepresentation of Black, Latinx, and Asian-American workers in managerial and leadership positions:

In the public transit workforce, 66% of managerial and leadership positions are held by white people, despite accounting for only 40% of transit riders, while people of color are underrepresented in every area of the industry despite making up a majority of transit riders. Black, Latinx, and Asian-American workers account for almost half of the total transit workforce—45%—but only 33.8% of managerial and leadership positions. Specifically, Black transit workers make up a quarter of the entire transit workforce and 27% of frontline workers, but less than 20% of managerial positions. Frontline workers, who are demographically more reflective of riders, have particular expertise about day-to-day operations and regularly interact with the public, yet are typically not included in decision-making.²⁴

Recognizing Mental Health Needs of Operators in San Jose

Following a mass shooting that left nine dead at one of its railyards, the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority has begun to review cultural challenges at the agency.²⁵ As employees have dealt with the trauma from the shooting, agency leadership has started to face allegations that the agency has fostered a toxic work culture. VTA employees from across the agency have complained to the agency about bullying and harassment.²⁶ “VTA is not a family. See something, say something. Well, I’m here speaking out just like many others have done bringing awareness to this issue and the culture within VTA. It’s time for this company to do something about it,” said a customer service worker during a 2021 VTA board meeting.²⁷

To begin to address concerns about agency culture and trauma suffered by employees, VTA is dedicating mental health resources to staff. The agency is in the process of forming discussion and support groups, and will offer on-site behavioral health clinicians and psychiatric counseling.²⁸ Some of the \$20 million VTA has received from the State of California for this initiative will be used to build a new trauma center to help VTA survivors and, in the future, others in the county. VTA management and the unions representing staff will determine how the remainder is used.



At many agencies, the difference between the two worlds can be seen by looking at the entrances to their offices versus the entrance to depots and other facilities for frontline workers.

A lack of representation among leadership can mean that operators do not feel their interests are being heard and lead to mistrust. Racial and cultural divides can lead to agency leadership that is closed off from the challenges employees face in the field and unable to react to emerging issues before they reach a crisis level. A stark example of this could be seen during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when the MTA, following CDC guidance, banned operators from wearing masks while driving transit vehicles.²⁹

The divide between operators and management has grown as pathways from the bus into leadership roles have shrunk. In the past, bus operators found they had a path to advance from the bus into the ranks of management. Increasingly, management and leadership roles at agencies are filled by professionals without frontline experience.³⁰ One former Maryland MTA operator describes the position as a job where you are expected to “arrive, shut up, do one thing for thirty-five years and retire.”³¹ This leaves operators feeling spoken down to and disrespected, finding themselves unable to take on greater responsibility despite having firsthand experience keeping buses on-time and dealing with riders in person.

Contrasts can also be seen in the facilities provided to operators versus those available to office staff. Office staff expect to have clean bathrooms and amenities available near their offices. The furniture in offices are usually well-kept and replaced often. That level of comfort is not given to operators. Operators can see the contrasts between what is given to office workers and what they are given. At many agencies, the difference between the two worlds can be seen by looking at the entrances to their offices versus the entrance to depots and other facilities for frontline workers.

29 <https://transitcenter.org/the-heroes-keeping-new-yorkers-moving-during-covid-19/>

30 <https://laurelintransit.com/2021/12/28/solving-the-operator-shortage-by-not-running-transit-like-a-business/>

31 <https://www.patrickparents.com/blog/the-invisible-seatbelt>

Split shifts make for long days for operators with awkward off-time in the middle—not quite long enough to take care of other responsibilities, and typically requiring operators to stay close to their depot.

Work Hours and Scheduling

Inflexible scheduling practices make it difficult for new and younger employees to maintain a work-life balance and forces employees to choose between their personal lives and their continued employment as an operator. Split shifts and mandated overtime make for difficult jobs if one has a family or any caregiving responsibilities, or are pursuing an education. Split shifts are separated by hours in between a day's driving assignments. A split shift, for example, could require an operator to drive during both peaks, starting with a shift from 7-10 a.m. and returning for a 3-7 p.m. shift. Such shifts make for long days for operators with awkward off-time in the middle—not quite long enough to take care of other responsibilities, and typically requiring operators to stay close to their depot. Split shifts have also been shown to increase operator fatigue and decrease an operator's ability to safely drive a bus.³²

These assignments often align with an agency's peak-oriented service needs, but they negatively impact operators' work-life balance. To fill scheduling gaps created by the operator shortfall, many agencies have increasingly employed split shifts and mandatory overtime, which has taken a toll on employees. The burden of split shifts and mandated overtime most often falls to younger and less tenured operators. Union contracts and agency pick processes provide experienced workers with the benefit of choosing their picks first. The pick process, usually occurring quarterly, is the process through which operators will choose which route and times they will drive. The most experienced operators get to choose first and usually select the most desirable shifts. The process continues with each operator choosing their route and shift in order of tenure.

While this rewards experience, it can be discouraging for new hires and negatively impact retention. When new and inexperienced operators get to choose at the end of the process, the most difficult shifts at the most inconvenient times remain. New drivers often find themselves working pre-dawn hours or late night shifts where they are often alone. Less experienced operators are also less able to guarantee a route that they are familiar with or with one starting at a depot with a short commute from their home. New operators can also find themselves struggling to meet their performance expectations as they are tackling some of the most challenging assignments without the experience necessary to handle them.

32 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0001457517301689>

Don't Burn Out

Denver's Regional Transportation District (RTD) had begun to grapple with operator shortfalls as early as 2016. Between 2013 and 2019, service hours increased 20% as new rail lines opened, a rapid bus line began operations, and regular service was expanded.³³ At the same time, a tightening labor market made it difficult for the agency to hire the needed personnel for the expansion. The Denver Metro's unemployment rate had dropped from 6.1% in 2014 to 2.6% in 2019.³⁴ Hiring for professions requiring CDLs was especially competitive as the trucking industry sought to expand its workforce and the Colorado Department of Transportation raised its hourly rates in an effort to hire 100 snowplow drivers.³⁵

In response to the shortfall, RTD began to expand the use of mandated work—overtime without the option to refuse. Many bus and light rail operators were required to work six days a week to meet service levels.³⁶ As mandated work is affected by seniority, the burden fell mostly on the shoulders of younger operators. This was cited by RTD as the top factor impacting employee retention. “We are getting more and more requests from bus and light rail operators to “please do something about the mandating situation. The excessive overtime is taking a toll on our employees.”³⁷ Mandated work has negatively impacted the morale of operators as they struggle to meet the demands of their personal lives while balancing their work responsibilities. “After a while you almost just want to call in sick so you can get off a couple of days in a row and go on vacation or do grocery shopping, you know the little things,” an anonymous operator told a local news station.³⁸

Facilities

Facilities, like break rooms, are sparse and fail to meet the needs of people in a job that is sedentary, stressful, and time-intensive. Break rooms are poorly furnished, lack comfortable seating, healthy food options, updated bathroom and washroom facilities, and even natural light in some cases. Dawn Distler, who started as a bus driver at Akron Metro RTA (Regional Transit Authority) and is now the agency's executive director who, tells a story about going into a break room to find couches that “were there when I left twenty-five years ago . . . And they look like they were there twenty-five years ago.”³⁹

The availability of facilities along routes is poor—operators struggle to find restrooms to use while on routes, and layover areas are sometimes a deserted street or under a bridge. The poor state of bathroom access for operators is striking—a survey conducted by the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) found that nearly 80% of surveyed operators did not have enough time built into their schedules for bathroom use.⁴⁰ 67% of respondents had developed a health problem or had a pre-existing condition grow worse because of lack of bathroom access.

The sedentary nature of the job also takes a toll on operators. Bus operators are more likely to suffer health problems because of this.

33 <https://wp-cpr.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2019/10/rtd-mandating-1.pdf>

34 <https://wp-cpr.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2019/10/rtd-mandating-1.pdf>

35 <https://wp-cpr.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2019/10/rtd-mandating-1.pdf>

36 <https://wp-cpr.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2019/10/rtd-mandating-1.pdf>

37 <https://wp-cpr.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2019/10/rtd-mandating-1.pdf>

38 <https://denver.cbslocal.com/2019/10/23/rtd-train-drivers-open-driver-shortage/>

39 <https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Transcript.pdf>

40 http://atucomm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ATU_RestroomAccess_v2.pdf



41 Source: Bushnell. (2018, July 25). The Health Status of Passenger Transit Workers: A Comparative Perspective from Group Health Insurance Medical Claims Data in the U.S. Preliminary results presented at a meeting of three NIOSH, National Occupational Research Agenda Councils: Transportation, Warehousing, and Utilities; Cardiovascular, Reproductive, Cancer, and Other Chronic Diseases; and Respiratory Health webinar

A study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) corroborates the ATU’s survey and finds that, compared to average workers, transit workers are much more likely to suffer diabetes, hypertension, and chronic respiratory diseases.⁴¹ While the job is sedentary, it is also very demanding on an operator. Steering a bus can be physically exhausting and staying constantly alert to road conditions is stressful and mentally taxing. The physical burdens of the job are great and can make it difficult to stay healthy over the course of a career.

Figure 4: Prevalence of Chronic Conditions Affecting Transit Workers⁴²

42 Source: Bushnell. (2018, July 25). The Health Status of Passenger Transit Workers: A Comparative Perspective from Group Health Insurance Medical Claims Data in the U.S. Preliminary results presented at a meeting of three NIOSH, National Occupational Research Agenda Councils: Transportation, Warehousing, and Utilities; Cardiovascular, Reproductive, Cancer, and Other Chronic Diseases; and Respiratory Health webinar

Condition	Difference in Transit Worker Rate Over General Population Rate
Cardiovascular	18%
Diabetes	57%
Diabetes	23%
Musculoskeletal	20%
Mental Health (Depression)	22%
Respiratory (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)	51%

The Role of Labor Unions in Advancing the Workforce and Attracting New Entrants



Transit labor unions have a role to play in helping to solve bus operator shortfalls across the country. They are vital in advocating for their members' interests, and calling for improved working conditions. Without their involvement, any actions to improve job quality and better retain new operators will surely fail. At this moment, union leadership must stand up to the challenge and meet the needs of their members, especially those early in their careers.

It is crucial that transit labor unions represent their younger members and prospective members by advocating for higher starting pay and improved working conditions for new starts. In negotiations with transit agencies, transit unions have the ability to advocate for the myriad of solutions needed to make being a bus operator more attractive to new entrants. Many of the actions that will improve the job for long time members, such as improving safety and boosting pay, will also bring benefits to new and prospective operators. New and prospective entrants also have specific needs that should be addressed by the unions. The first years on the job are some of the most

difficult: pay is low, shifts are made up of the most difficult hours on the most difficult routes, and there is increased pressure to keep the bus on time and keep your job. The unions must do more to ensure that their newest members are not forgotten.

The ATU and the Transport Workers' Union (TWU) have long represented the interests of transit workers across North America. The unions and their members are key partners in solving the labor shortfall and creating a healthy, empowered transit workforce.

"The operator shortage is a shortage of wages and benefits, but it's also a shortage of dignity and respect. Transit agencies don't value our members when they eliminate retirement benefits, keep wages low, mandate forced overtime, and fail to protect workers on the job. During the pandemic, transit agencies called our members and all transit workers heroes, but at the bargaining table management still treats them like zeroes. Skilled operators with CDLs can find better opportunities where they don't have to risk their lives when they go to work. Addressing the operator shortage starts with agencies negotiating better pay and benefits, but it also extends to management prioritizing workers' health and safety in all aspects of the job. Our Union is doing our part by setting the standard for operator apprenticeship and mentorship programs that will help retain current workers and attract many more to the industry. We urge our transit allies to continue the important work of fighting to improve the lives of workers who move our communities every day." —**ATU International President John Costa.**⁴³

43 Quote given to us by ATU



Outdated Job Requirements and Hiring Processes

Long hiring processes and outdated job requirements make it difficult for agencies to bring on new operators quickly and reduce the number of eligible candidates that agencies have to consider. Applicants sometimes wait for extended periods while agencies undertake background checks and other hiring processes. While logistical burdens make it difficult for agencies to get candidates in the door quickly, that wait time can be a nonstarter if a potential hire needs a job right away. Additionally, many agencies still require that potential hires already hold a CDL prior to applying—an investment of time and money before a person has been accepted into a role. While increasingly agencies are helping candidates prepare, test, and pay for CDLs, it is still not the norm.

In order to obtain a CDL, an applicant must first obtain a Commercial Learner's Permit (CLP). The CLP will allow the applicant to practice driving on public roads. Before a CLP is issued, the applicant must take and pass a written test. They will also need to be medically cleared by their state and have their driving record checked for any serious driving violations. As of February 2, 2022, CDL applicants must complete entry-level training with a registered trainer before taking the test for the full license. Once the training is completed, the applicant can take the CDL test. It is a three-part skills test: a vehicle

While logistical burdens make it difficult for agencies to get candidates in the door quickly, that wait time can be a nonstarter if a potential hire needs a job right away.



inspection test, a basic controls test, and a road test. Once passed, an applicant will receive their license either in-person or via mail. There are costs associated with obtaining both the CLP and the CDL which vary by state.⁴⁴ CDL applicants must pass a drug test before obtaining the license. They are also subject to random tests while they hold the permit and mandatory tests in the event of a traffic incident.⁴⁵

Finally, federal drug test requirements haven't kept up with changing regulations. Applicants who test positive for marijuana use can still be rejected, even in states where recreational use is now legal. Further, many agencies only perform urine analyses, which detect marijuana use 3–67 days after use, and disqualify applicants who recreationally use legal marijuana in their private time. Currently, agencies perform urine analyses, which detect marijuana use 3–67 days after use, and disqualify applicants who recreationally use legal marijuana in their private time. Agencies could avoid this by switching to oral testing, which detects drug use in the past 24 hours and is a better safety precaution as it alerts the agency to whether someone might be impaired when they are on the job. This shift would require revised drug testing rules from the federal government.

44 <https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/commercial-drivers-license/how-do-i-get-commercial-drivers-license>
45 <https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/regulations/drug-alcohol-testing/what-tests-are-required-and-when-does-testing-occur>

The Pandemic Deepened an Existing Crisis

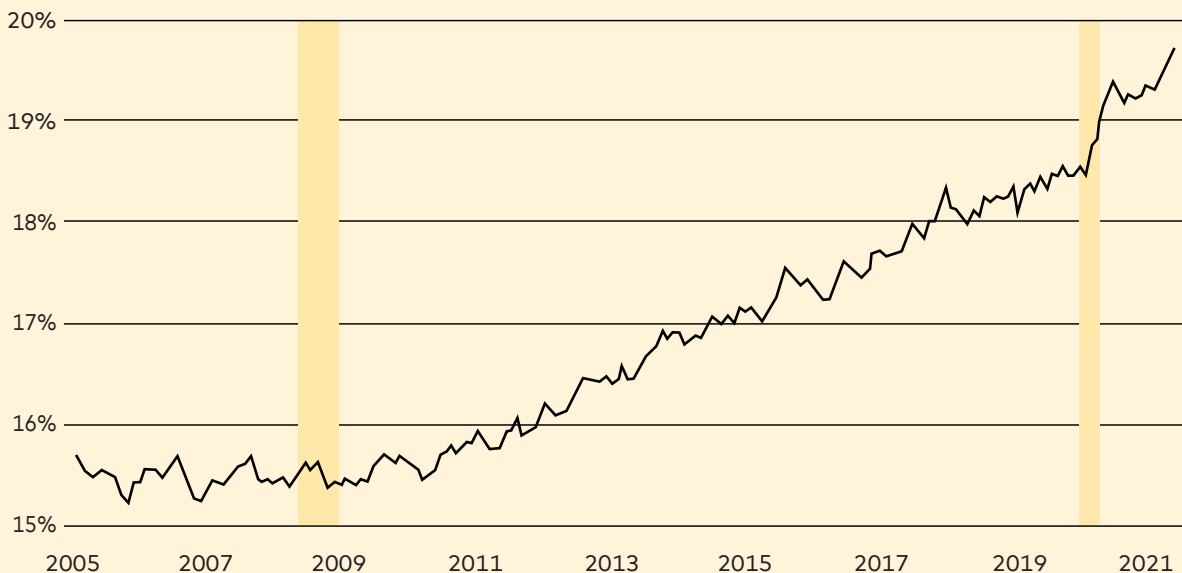
COVID-19 has had a large and significant impact on the transit industry, and operator illnesses placed much stress and dissatisfaction on an already depleted workforce. In the early days of the pandemic many transit workers fell ill, having contracted COVID-19 due to their frequent interactions with the public and lack of personal protective equipment. Throughout 2020 and 2021, COVID-19 spread quickly among the transit workforce as operators continued to be face-to-face with the public, providing essential service to other frontline workers. Crowded breakrooms made it difficult for social distancing from each other between runs. As of 2022, the ATU reported that 220 members died from COVID across the United States and Canada.⁴⁷ In New York alone, the MTA lost more than 100 employees, many of whom were bus operators.⁴⁸ In addition to loss of life, COVID-19 has kept many operators out on sick leave.

47 <https://www.atu.org/remember-our-fallen>

48 <https://new.mta.info/covid-memorial>

49 https://www.kansascityfed.org/research/economic-bulletin/what-has-driven-the-recent-increase-in-retirements/?utm_source=pocket_mylist

Figure 5: The Share of Retirees in the U.S. Population Spiked during the Pandemic⁴⁹



■ National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER)-defined recessions



Throughout the fall and winter of 2021–2022, the highly transmissible omicron variant led to a spike in operator absences which limited the amount of service that was scheduled across the country.⁵⁰ On one day in January, the MBTA reported over 40 active cases of COVID-19.

At the start of the pandemic, shutdowns and stay-at-home orders decimated transit ridership and put the long-term financial stability of transit agencies in jeopardy. With declining ridership came drops in revenue to agencies, which then forced agencies to institute hiring freezes. These measures were undertaken to ensure the long-term financial health of transit agencies—many feared a prolonged pandemic could cause irreversible harm to their budgets if dramatic action was not taken. Eventually, federal legislation provided aid to transit agencies and allowed many to begin hiring again, but, in the meantime, agencies lost potential hires and fell behind on bringing in much needed staff. Now two years in, the pandemic has brought long-term changes to commuting patterns and could mean dramatic changes to ridership and service patterns. Transit agencies have just begun to adjust and much uncertainty remains. The impact of all these trends will fall on operators.

The pandemic also accelerated the retirement timeline of many operators. 2020 saw a spike in retirements across the US job market, as older workers elected to leave the workforce.⁵¹ This was especially true in the transit sector where a large number of workers were eligible to retire.

50 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-surge-stymies-public-transit-systems-11641247808>

51 https://www.kansascityfed.org/research/economic-bulletin/what-has-driven-the-recent-increase-in-retirements/?utm_source=pocket_mylist

Worker Shortages Are Not Unique to the Transit Industry

Across the US economy, employers are struggling to fill openings, particularly in industries with relatively low pay and high public contact.⁵² In the early months of the pandemic, the labor force participation rate—the percentage of Americans 16 and older working or looking for work—had the largest drop since World War II. Even as labor force participation grows, it is still at the lowest levels since the 1970s.⁵³ If the participation rate was as high as it was in February 2020, the US would have 4.3 million more workers.⁵⁴

Trucking, an industry that seeks workers with similar skill sets to the transit industry, is also experiencing labor shortages. According to the American Trucking Association (ATA), the United States was short 80,000 truck drivers in 2021.⁵⁵ Much like the transit industry, many factors have contributed to the shortage: an aging workforce ready to retire, difficult job conditions such as long hours and poor relief facilities, and cumbersome and outdated hiring requirements have made it difficult to train and hire interested applicants.⁵⁶ As trucking seeks to onboard more workers it has looked to some of the solutions transit agencies have considered, including increased pay, regulatory changes to ease hiring, and changes to business practices to improve conditions for workers.⁵⁷ “There is no shortage of experienced truckers. However, there is a problem with these drivers getting fair pay and treatment from their employers,” Teamsters General President Jim Hoffa commented in a speech on the shortage.⁵⁸

- 52 <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/state-line/2021/11/12/there-are-more-jobs-than-jobless-people-in-42-states>
- 53 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/labor-shortage-missing-workers-jobs-pay-raises-economy-11634224519>
- 54 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/labor-shortage-missing-workers-jobs-pay-raises-economy-11634224519>
- 55 https://www.trucking.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ATA%20Driver%20Shortage%20Report%202021%20Executive%20Summary.FINAL_.pdf
- 56 https://www.trucking.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ATA%20Driver%20Shortage%20Report%202021%20Executive%20Summary.FINAL_.pdf
- 57 https://www.trucking.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/ATA%20Driver%20Shortage%20Report%202021%20Executive%20Summary.FINAL_.pdf
- 58 <https://teamster.org/2021/12/hoffa-dont-blame-workers-for-delivery-delays-this-season/>
- 59 <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/local/transportation/2021/09/23/indygo-bus-schedules-change-due-driver-shortage/5827913001/>

Shortfalls Are Impacting Service Restoration and Reopening

Increasingly, transit agencies are citing operator shortfalls as a major obstacle to restoring service to pre-COVID levels. A lack of operators has frustrated efforts to welcome back riders and begin to recover from COVID-era losses. Such cuts are happening across the United States, at transit agencies large and small. IndyGo in Indianapolis was forced to cut service on 15 routes in October 2021.⁵⁹ Atlanta’s MARTA, LA Metro, Washington, DC, WMATA, St. Louis’s Metro Transit, and many others are also cutting service due to lack of operators. For riders, service cuts and canceled trips lead to increased trip lengths, reduced reliability, and degraded customer experience. Such shortcomings negatively impact riders’ perception of transit and decrease their likelihood to return to revenue-strapped agencies hoping to restore pre-pandemic ridership. Agencies’ ability to solve these problems has been limited, despite their best efforts. Solving the crisis won’t happen overnight, and it requires big, creative solutions at the agency, state, and federal level.

In San Francisco and Los Angeles, Operator Shortfalls Are Affecting a Return to Pre-COVID Service Levels



The SFMTA has struggled to deliver on the missive from its board of directors to restore 100% of pre-COVID service, and the operator shortfall has been the biggest obstacle. As of September 30, 2021, SFMTA had only restored 75% of pre-pandemic service, but was still experiencing open shifts and canceled trips.⁶⁰

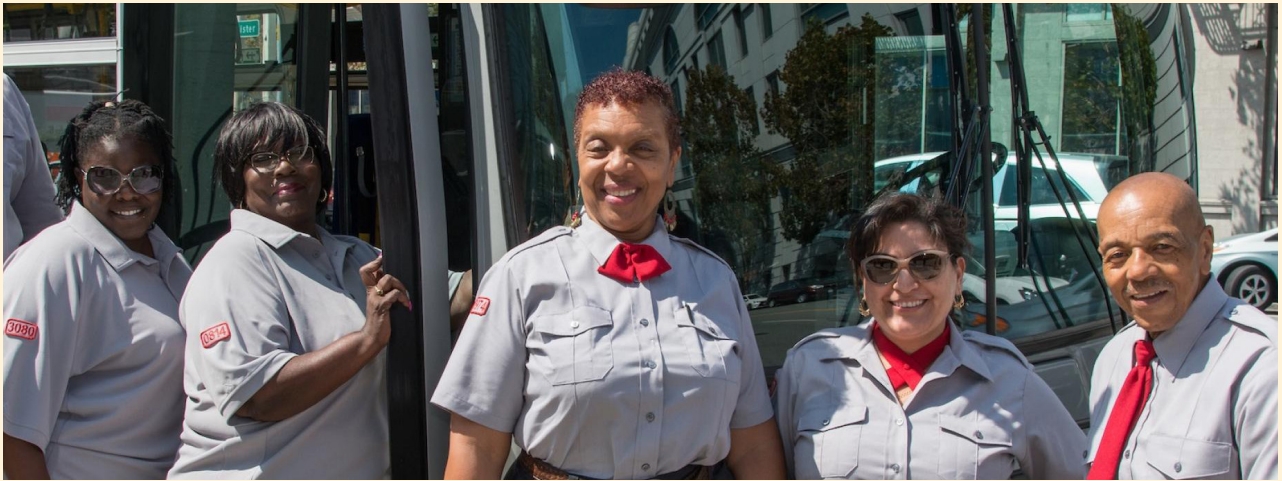
However, SFMTA was aware of operator shortfalls before the pandemic. In 2019, SFMTA's MUNI Reliability Working Group found that SFMTA's operator shortfall was having the biggest impact on service reliability.⁶¹ The working group recommended several actions to address shortfalls by the summer of 2021, including working with other San Francisco city agencies such as the Department of Human Resources to bolster recruitment and

testing, the Department of Real Estate to increase training facilities, and the Department of Public Health to expedite medical clearances.⁶² The working group also called for SFMTA to augment its CityDrive program, which ensures free, accelerated test preparation for CDL licenses for potential hires. Based on working group recommendations, SFMTA committed to hiring more human resources and training staff to help accommodate a faster onboarding process.⁶³

These plans were placed on hold when, in a budget control measure, SFMTA enacted a hiring freeze in April 2020⁶⁴, as the pandemic swept across the US. The agency was not able to resume hiring until March 2021 and operator

Figure 6: SFMTA hiring needs for 85% Service Levels as of 09/11/21

	Total Vacant	Total Filled	Total Positions	% Vacant
Transit Operations & Training (non-operator)	136	430	566	24%
Vehicle Maintenance	177	837	1,014	17%
Maintenance of Way + Mechanical Systems	86	150	236	36%
Planning/Administration	40	24	64	63%
Transit Capital Delivery	16	38	54	30%
Cable Car	28	97	125	22%
Total	483	1,576	2,059	23%



training took even longer, resuming in June 2021. Since 2019, SFTMA’s Transit Division’s vacancy rate has been 10% or higher, most recently spiking to 24% in 2021.⁶⁵

LA Metro’s NextGen Bus Plan—a bus network redesign aimed at increasing frequency, reliability, and accessibility for riders—has also been hampered by chronic staff shortfalls further exacerbated by the continued spread of COVID among operators. As the agency has rolled out the new bus program and attempted to restore service to pre-COVID levels, they have been unable to meet their promised level of service given a lack of operators.

Throughout 2021, LA Metro struggled to hire new operators, resulting in a shortfall of nearly 600 bus operators.⁶⁶ Low starting salaries, long commutes, and poor job conditions have made it difficult for the agency to hire and retain new operators. Competition for talent against other operators in the region, such as Long Beach Transit, Foothill Transit, and Santa Monica Big Blue Bus, make it especially difficult for LA Metro to find staff.

The inability to maintain staff levels has led to a recent increase in canceled trips, which, in January 2022, peaked at 17.4%.⁶⁷ Those cancellations occurred disproportionately in South Los Angeles—13 of the 15 routes with a 25% or higher cancellation rate are located there.⁶⁸

Beginning February 20, 2022, LA Metro announced a 12% temporary service cut to scheduled service.⁶⁹ These cuts will allow LA Metro to meet the promised schedule as well as reduce the amount of mandatory overtime operators are made to work to meet a schedule that LA Metro does not have sufficient staff to cover.

60 September 30th memo

61 <https://sfcontroller.org/sites/default/files/Muni%20Reliability%20Working%20Group/SFMTA%20Working%20Group%20Recommendations%20Review%20Dec.%202013%20Mtg.pdf>

62 <https://sfcontroller.org/sites/default/files/Muni%20Reliability%20Working%20Group/SFMTA%20Working%20Group%20Recommendations%20Review%20Dec.%202013%20Mtg.pdf>

63 <https://sfcontroller.org/sites/default/files/Muni%20Reliability%20Working%20Group/SFMTA%20Working%20Group%20Recommendations%20Review%20Dec.%202013%20Mtg.pdf>

64 July 2nd memo

65 September 30th memo

66 <https://investinginplace.org/2022/03/15/the-metro-bus-operator-crisis/>

67 <https://www.metro.net/riding/nextrip/?tab=bus-cancellation-report>

68 <https://investinginplace.org/2022/03/15/the-metro-bus-operator-crisis/>

69 <https://laist.com/news/transportation/la-metro-service-cuts-bus-operator-shortage>

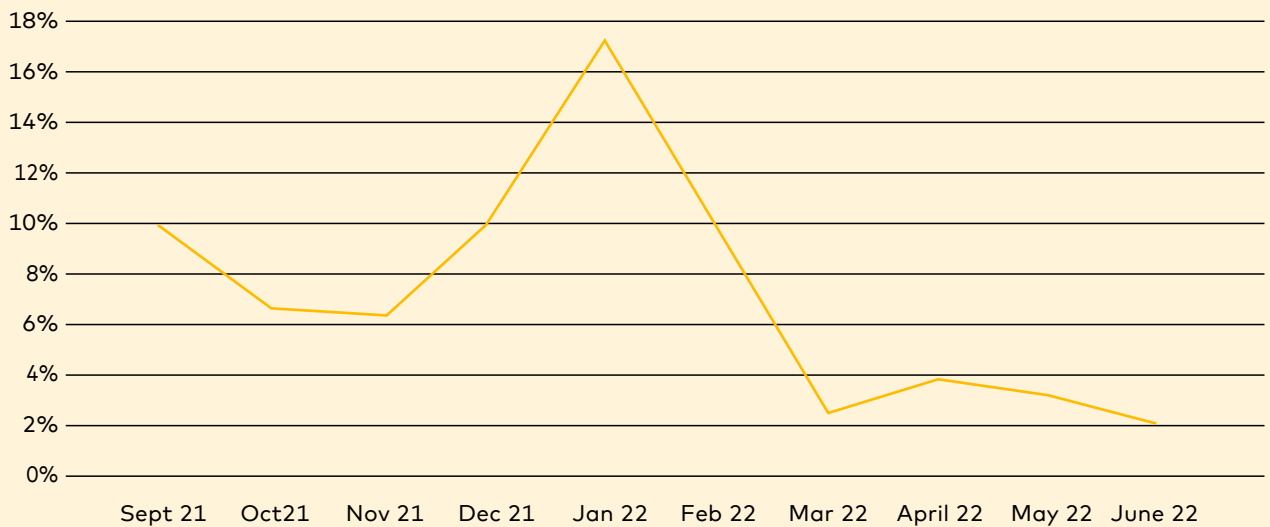
Figure 7: Number of operators who quit, were fired, or retired (separated) from LA Metro than were hired in 2021

Month	Hired	Separated	Net
Mar-21	56	47	9
Apr-21	106	63	43
May-21	95	81	14
Jun-21	96	83	13
Jul-21	57	81	-24
Aug-21	46	45	1
Sep-21	32	79	-47
Oct-21	35	68	-33
Nov-21	26	51	-25
Dec-21	11	32	-21 ⁷⁰



70 <https://investinginplace.org/2022/03/15/the-metro-bus-operator-crisis/>

Figure 8: Percent of trips canceled by LA Metro by month



Conductores
cargan feria
fichas para
tobús

Unnecessary
conversation with
operator is
prohibited by law
Conversaciones
innecesarias con
el conductor están
prohibidas por la ley

Welcome to Metro Vehicle

4079

Financial Responsibility

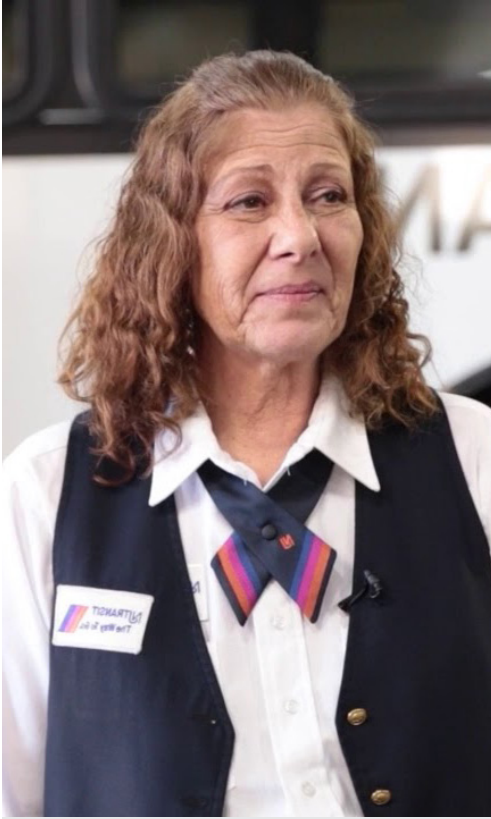
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The Important Role the Federal Government Can Play

The Federal government can take the following six following steps to help transit agencies address this crisis now:

- 1. Use the public and media appearances of Secretary Buttigieg and other USDOT and FTA leadership to bring attention to this issue:** The shortfall in operators is forcing transit agencies to make service cuts—this crisis merits the secretary using his bullhorn to bring attention to possible solutions. Using the bully pulpit of the secretary elevates the importance of the crisis and how essential the public transit workforce is.
- 2. Form an Interagency Task Force:** USDOT should look to replicate the effort that the White House, USDOT, and other federal agencies assembled around the shortfall in supply chain drivers/trucking industry.
- 3. Comprehensive Guidance and FAQs:** The USDOT should issue new guidance and FAQs as to which sources and what uses of federal funds local agencies might expend to solve the shortage in transit operators and mechanics. Explaining which NOFOs (Notice of Funding Opportunities) and grant programs have allowable workforce development spending will help agencies to better utilize Federal funding. For example, the Bus and Bus Facilities NOFO allows transit agencies to spend funding on the construction of facilities such as depots which include bathrooms and breakrooms, an important factor to address the shortage in transit operators and mechanics.
- 4. Elevate driver safety as a national issue:** Assaults against transit workers are a concern for workers, transit agencies, and the public and contribute to an overall feeling of insecurity. The USDOT should speak openly and honestly about the severity of the situation, catalog the severity of the problem, and invest in methods to mitigate these assaults.
- 5. Revise guidance around drug testing:** Federal drug test requirements historically haven't kept up with changing regulations, but that is being changed. Previously, applicants who test positive for marijuana use can still be rejected, even in states where recreational use is now legal. New guidance should reflect the change in local laws as well as shift to oral testing, which detects drug use in the past 24 hours and is a better safety precaution as it alerts the agency to whether someone might be impaired when they are on the job. Adoption of the new rule should be tied to federal funds so it is quickly changed at the local level.
- 6. Launch of a national advertising campaign to recruit operators and mechanics:** The USDOT should draw on the advertising capacity of the federal government and work with the Ad Council to develop a public relations effort to promote respect and dignity on the job for bus drivers. Public service announcements could highlight: how operators are a critical part of the frontline workforce; the myriad ways that drivers assist passengers; examples of drivers deriving satisfaction from their job; and then conversely examples of drivers having to manage unnecessary abuse from the public. The selection of messengers and story lines should also convey the racial and gender diversity of the work force and ridership and tie to the themes captured in the Ad Council's "Love Has No Labels" campaign.



Solutions

Agencies working to solve operator shortfalls must improve job quality for bus operators and work to make operating a bus a rewarding career, both financially and professionally.

1. Getting new applicants in the door is the first step to rebuilding the workforce

Agencies must make a more compelling pitch to potential hires. Some agencies have begun to offer signing bonuses to accomplish this. NJ Transit is offering new hires \$6,000 signing bonuses if they already hold a CDL or \$3,000 if they hold a CDL permit.⁷¹ MBTA offered qualified new hires a signing bonus worth up to \$4,500.⁷²

Agencies must also more clearly articulate the benefits of their full compensation packages. Many agencies offer generous benefits but do not take the time to explain how much operators stand to gain from them. Agencies should show how their healthcare plans compare to those in the private sector or describe the level of retirement income operators can receive from their pensions.

Agencies must also create better pitches to potential applicants and sell the job not only as a paycheck but as a career serving one's community. IndyGo's "Why I Drive" campaign features current operators speaking about their jobs and why they enjoy them, focusing on service to the community and IndyGo's family-oriented work culture.⁷³ Other agencies have taken a similar approach and made social media friendly videos and campaigns that appeal to younger people.

Agencies must also work to build pipelines for high school and college students looking for careers in transit. New York's Transit Tech High School provides an example. The high school trains students for careers in the transit industry and, through their relationship with the MTA, seeks to provide its students with internships and employment opportunities.⁷⁴

2. Improve hiring processes

Agencies must also improve hiring processes that are more reflective of current practices. Applications should always be web accessible and easy to find. They should be shared on major jobs boards and LinkedIn as well as on government jobs websites. In New York City, the MTA posts all Bus Operator jobs on LinkedIn, making opportunities easy to find and apply for. Similarly, WeGo in Nashville lists their Bus Operator jobs, as they do with all of their job postings,

71 <https://www.njtransit.com/bus-careers>

72 <https://www.mbta.com/careers/get-started-mbta-operator>

73 <https://www.indygo.net/whyidrive/>

74 <https://transittechhs.org/>

What States Can Do to Address the Driver Shortfall

While transit agencies bear the primary responsibility for changing the working conditions of bus operators, state governments have an important role to play as well.

- ✔ **Funding Transit Operations:** Many transit agencies are in need of increased operating support in order to increase wages while aiming to provide frequent, reliable service. States must do more to ensure that their transit agencies are well funded and able to provide their employees with quality jobs. Operations support would enable cash-strapped agencies to think bigger as they plan to hire more employees and expand the service they provide to riders.

While many of the largest US agencies receive support from their state governments, too many states short-change transit. Texas, for example, only provided its growing transit networks with \$40 million of operating support in 2019. In comparison, Massachusetts provided its agencies with \$900 million.⁷⁵

Supporting localities in improving service: Capital projects, such as the expansion of bus lanes and the implementation of transit signal priority projects, can help to increase bus speeds and reliability. The resulting service improvements can make life easier for bus operators by shortening run times and reducing the number of obstacles encountered along routes. Service improvements can also reduce conflicts between operators and riders as delays and trip cancellation can lead to frustrated, angry passengers. States should provide financial incentives to cities building bus improvement projects.

- ✔ **Expediting CDLs:** Often, CDLs have a waiting period between permit tests and road tests. Additionally, road tests are often only administered by the state. With high volumes of applicants, this can mean long wait times for appointments and slow the hiring process. New York State, recognizing how both factors can affect hiring timelines, both eliminated the 14-day waiting period between tests and allowed qualified third-parties to perform road tests. However, while eliminating the CDL process can quicken the hiring process, it's important that both states and transit agencies first focus on making the job more desirable overall, specifically in regards to pay and job conditions.

- ✔ **Second Chance programs:** Expanding the pool of potential applicants is critical to addressing the shortfall. Many states around the country have developed second chance programs which give access to job training opportunities to those who face barriers to employment like formerly incarcerated individuals or recovering drug or alcohol addicts,. In Louisiana, the Re-Entry Court program prepares nonviolent incarcerated individuals with an opportunity to acquire vocational skills during incarceration, including training to become bus mechanics and body repair technicians. This has expanded the applicant pool for the New Orleans RTA, who have also committed to hiring and providing on-the-job training for people who have completed the vocational program.

75 <https://www.transit.dot.gov/ntd/data-product/2019-funding-sources>



on Governmentjobs.com, the largest public sector job board in the country. Expanding posting across various well-known professional job boards will help to widen the applicant pool and attract qualified candidates.

Agencies need to also improve response rates to applications and not let applications sit unacknowledged for weeks or months—the job market is tight and applicants will find other opportunities. MBTA has begun to offer conditional job offers to qualified applicants at hiring events, for example.^{76,77}

Finally, agencies need to do more to help applicants without CDLs obtain them. Providing paid training while undergoing the CDL application helps to ensure that applicants follow through in their candidacy and into the position. Increasingly, agencies are covering the costs of CDL applications as part of job training. Both the MBTA in Boston, Massachusetts, and CTA in Chicago cover the cost of the CDL permit if accepted into the bus operator training program.⁷⁸ Covering the costs of permits and applications eliminates one more barrier in successfully recruiting new hires.

3. Competitive compensation

Providing competitive pay is a critical element in attracting and retaining employees. Agencies must work harder to ensure that current employees do not leave due to things agencies can control. Ensuring operator salaries are considered middle class within the agency's service area is a good first step as operators ought to be able to afford to live in the communities they serve.

Starting salaries must be competitive and new hires should be on the fast track to median wages to ensure they stay on.⁷⁹ TriMet, in Portland's transit agency, recently raised its starting pay \$4 to \$25.24 per hour. New hires are eligible for a \$7,500 signing bonus and can expect to reach the top rate of \$33.65 in their 35th month on the job.⁸⁰ Similarly, Houston METRO offers a \$4,000 bonus upon hiring and, to attract bilingual operators, offers hourly pay increases for those who speak Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, or American Sign Language.

4. Improve employee facilities

Restroom access and better employee facilities are needed for employee health and wellness.⁸¹ All routes should provide safe, clean places for relief. These don't all have to be agency owned and maintained. Community partners and businesses could be compensated for allowing operators to use their facilities. In some cases veteran

76 <https://www.mbta.com/events/2022-04-05/hiring-fair-one-stop-bus-operator-hiring-event>

77 <https://twitter.com/MBTA/status/1511347657675055111>

78 <https://www.mbta.com/careers/get-started-mbta-bus-operator>, <https://www.transitchicago.com/careers/ptbo/>

79 <https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/BusDriving.pdf>

80 <https://news.trimet.org/2022/04/trimet-raises-new-operator-starting-pay-to-25-24-per-hour-increases-hiring-bonus-to-7500/>

81 <https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/BusDriving.pdf>

Bus operators at Metro Transit in Minneapolis have been running a mentorship program since 2018, aimed at connecting new operators with existing operators to help them navigate being on the job.

operators often know friendly places where they can stop and use this institutional knowledge to build formalized programs. In the Twin Cities, Metro Transit’s contract with the ATU Local 1005 requires the agency to provide adequate restroom access along routes. Metro Transit worked with operators to identify private businesses and organizations along routes that could be compensated in exchange for provided access to operators.⁸² Agencies can also design routes that are more responsive to operator needs by starting, ending, and laying over routes at transit centers and other locations that have restrooms and other amenities.

Depot and break rooms are also important for employee health and wellness. They should include opportunities for physical activity, relaxation, and rejuvenation. Gym equipment and games like ping pong encourage operators to get more exercise while serving as distractions from the stress of the job. Agencies should pursue the use of IJJA funds, particularly bus and bus facilities grants, for these sorts of improvements. In 2016, Green Mountain Transit in Burlington, Vermont, added an underground break room to its new transit center. The break room features a kitchen, restrooms, computers for operator use, and a separate room with napping chairs.⁸³ Maryland’s MTA also furnished their break room with reclining couches with USB plugs so operators could truly relax on their breaks.⁸⁴ In early 2022, the County of Hawaii also prioritized break facilities for bus operators, with Hele-On Mass Transit Administrator John Andoh saying, “For the health and welfare of those operators, we should provide them with a space to relax during those times.”⁸⁵

5. Supporting people in their careers and lives

Operators need better mental health and professional development support. In the United Kingdom, Oxfordshire bus operators teamed up to provide a peer-to-peer mental health support service for bus drivers, recognizing the difficulties the pandemic brought to a job that was already taxing. This new program builds on an existing Employee Assistance Programme that provides mental health support, including access to counselors. The new program trains drivers to provide support to their colleagues by identifying signs of depression and resources to source further support when required. Offering access to mental health professionals can also benefit operators who have undergone any type of on-the-job trauma.

Pairing new hires with veteran operators can educate less experienced operators on the tricks of the trade, and help build

82 [https://www.transportcenter.org/images/uploads/publications/Bus_Operator_Restroom_Use_\(interactive\)_1.27_.pdf](https://www.transportcenter.org/images/uploads/publications/Bus_Operator_Restroom_Use_(interactive)_1.27_.pdf)

83 <https://www.mynbc5.com/article/bus-driver-break-room-gets-upgrade-in-new-downtown-burlington-transit-center/8109057>

84 <https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Transcript.pdf>

85 <https://www.hawaiitribune-herald.com/2022/01/10/hawaii-news/waikoloa-bus-drivers-to-get-a-breakroom-pahoa-bus-hub-could-get-a-public-library/>



organizational culture. It also helps remind operators that they are all in this together and that they have coworkers to turn to when they need help, which is crucial for operators who have experienced threats or suffered violence. Bus operators at Metro Transit in Minneapolis have been running a mentorship program since 2018, aimed at connecting new operators with existing operators to help them navigate being on the job.⁸⁶ Valley Transportation Authority in San Jose, California, also has a long-standing labor-management mentorship program where bus operators, mechanics, and other transit professionals and management are paired together for both professional development as well to build bridges between front line and leadership to improve the work environments.⁸⁷ These mentorships support newer employees as they transition to a new work environment, and provide them a sounding board and source of advice as they navigate a new job.

6. Operator safety is paramount

The rate of operator assaults is increasing at a concerning rate. A recent study by New York's MTA shows that harassment of MTA bus drivers accounts for three-quarters of all transit worker assaults in recent years, including threats and spitting, among other offenses.⁸⁸

In the US, driver cockpits are rarely separated from the rest of the bus, which makes drivers vulnerable to assaults. Agencies must work to create more secure cockpits for operators that still allow operators to carry out their customer service functions. In London bus drivers have a cockpit that is completely enclosed from passengers. They are still able to perform their customer service functions, including answering questions and attending to passengers with disabilities if needed. As US transit agencies procure new buses—with the transition to all electric fleets happening across the country—there is an opportunity to also reconsider the internal design and provide more protection to bus drivers.

Agencies must also take fare collection off the list of responsibilities for operators, as these interactions put operators in harm's way and make them a target. Offboard fare collection and all-door boarding should be employed more frequently to remove that responsibility from operators. Unarmed ambassadors should be deployed to help deal with onboard issues when they arise, calling on police backup only when necessary.

Better accessibility at bus stops—often the responsibility of a combination of city transportation departments and transit agencies—will also reduce the list of operator responsibilities. If people in mobility

86 <https://www.metrotransit.org/mentor-program-expands-innovates-to-connect-operators>

87 <https://www.vta.org/blog/vta-helps-spread-transit-mentoring-program-career-success>

88 <https://www.amny.com/transit/bus-driver-harassment-three-quarters/>

Finding affordable and reliable childcare within reasonable proximity to work or home is both important and a difficult task for families with young children. Transit agencies and unions should talk to their employees and members with children to ask what help they need.

devices can board the bus without operator help and automated wheelchair restraints are installed, drivers wouldn't have to leave their seats as much.

7. Flexibility in scheduling, to the extent possible

Operators must be given greater control over their schedules, despite the logistical challenges the change presents to agencies. Swing shifts,⁸⁹ split shifts, and mandated overtime are burning out operators and making it difficult for them to take care of life's other responsibilities. Agencies must reduce the use of all three whenever possible.

One way to do this would be to make it easier to switch shifts, or to pay operators a higher hourly rate for night and weekend shifts. Junior employees are often left with the worst shifts and have little to no ability to make adjustments or figure out alternative solutions. Agencies and unions should both recognize and address this challenge, from building avenues for operators to swap shifts. There are many software programs that manage and seamlessly process shift swaps. Deputy, Camelo, and Shiftboard are several of the many new tools available for this. Additionally, at many transit agencies, employees receive a night shift pay differential, which can be between 10–20% above the daytime hourly rate. In Denver, Colorado, employees whose work starts after 11 p.m. or before 4 a.m., or who have a regular work shift of which four hours or more falls between those hours, receive an additional \$2.25 on top of their hourly pay.⁹⁰ Offering a pay differential for certain shifts can encourage operators at a variety of seniority levels to take these shifts instead of leaving them to new entrants. Giving new operators the opportunity to take daytime shifts—possibly routes with lower ridership and in uncongested areas—also gives them valuable experience to build confidence and comfort in the job.

Finally, agencies should also find ways to help employees, particularly those with irregular shifts, with childcare or other caregiving needs. VIA in San Antonio, Texas, opened an on-site childcare center in their main operating facility in 1990 after consulting employees on their needs. While the facility closed in 2014 because utilization dropped, it only did so after revisiting employee needs to confirm. Finding affordable and reliable childcare within reasonable proximity to work or home is both important and a difficult task for families with young children. Transit agencies and unions should talk to their employees and members with children to ask what help they need. Providing lists of peer-reviewed childcare facilities, direct subsidies,

89 Swing shifts are shifts that are in between the day and night shifts, meaning they run from approximately 3–4 p.m. to midnight.

90 Page 122, <https://www.rtd-denver.com/sites/default/files/files/2018-10/2018-labor-agreement.pdf>



and negotiated childcare rates are just some of the options agencies should consider to retain staff.

8. Listen to Operators




Agencies must be more proactive in seeking out operator feedback and identifying workforce issues before they reach a crisis level. Bus and rail operators interact directly with the riding public on a daily basis and can provide valuable insights about the needs of transit riders. However, they have not always been included or given the opportunity to contribute to agency decision-making. Seeking worker feedback and following up to incorporate their ideas builds trust, which in turn allows agencies to make better, more inclusive decisions. Programs such as the Maryland Transit Administration’s “In-reach” program gives operators the opportunity to give the agency constructive feedback and contribute to the success of major initiatives such as bus network redesigns, service changes, workforce development, and other aspects of agency practice that affect them.⁹¹ Bus operators sit with the executive staff, the administrator, the COO, the director of bus operations, director of maintenance, and they have a conversation about ways to proactively improve the service, together.⁹² By recognizing the expertise of frontline workers and directly seeking their feedback when making changes, the Maryland MTA has established an agency culture that clearly values the input of its entire workforce, which helps retain employees.

The end of COVID-19 will not bring the end of operator shortfalls; they will persist unless agencies address core issues with the job. To begin ending operator shortfalls, the transit industry as a whole must recognize the vital role that operators play and work to increase the attractiveness of the position. Transit operators are the backbone of the transit industry; they must be held in esteem and dealt with fairly if we wish to see a thriving transit industry.

91 <https://transitcenter.org/baltimore-mtas-in-reach-program-is-meeting-operators-where-they-are/>

92 <https://transitcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Transcript.pdf>

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