

Steering Success: AC Transit’s Holistic Strategy for Bus Operator Shortage

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Lisa V. Rose

Workforce Crisis: Where are the Bus Drivers?

A crisis is looming over transit systems nationwide as the demand for bus operators outstrips the available workforce. Many working Americans have been left scrambling to find alternative ways from A to B as more¹ and more² transit routes have been cut. School children, too, have often had to wait an hour or even longer³ for a bus ride home. The buses are not the problem—there is no one available to drive them. Indeed, data shows that across the nation, there is a significant shortage of bus operators. In a 2022 American Public Transportation Association (APTA) survey⁴ 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, throwing the entire system into crisis.

This dire situation has led transit agencies and school districts to get creative trying to get their passengers from A to B—hopefully on time, too. One school district in Santa Cruz, California, asked⁵ fuelers and mechanics to step in and began offering free training courses to entice (and certify) new hires. Other agencies and districts have just been forced to drop routes for the short-term or permanently.

What if the solution is much more straightforward? One Bay Area transit agency has made major changes to their training program in an attempt to significantly mitigate the operator shortage and empower their employees and communities at the same time.

The Alameda Contra-Costa Transit District⁶ (AC Transit), based out of Oakland, California, is the largest public bus-only system in the state, and the 3rd largest bus-only transit agency in the country. The agency serves 1.5 million East Bay residents over a 364 square mile service area. Their fleet includes 640 buses with 6 facilities. AC Transit also connects to 16 other public and private bus systems, 28 BART stations, 7 Amtrak stations and 3 ferry terminals and operates with the mission to “deliver safe, reliable, sustainable transit service that responds to the needs of our customers and community.” Last year, facing the same crisis as so many other agencies, AC Transit implemented bus operator retention bonuses and enhanced their training program, hoping to attract a sufficient number of new employees to fill the staff shortage and to retain these employees as part of the AC Transit team long term. They added significant financial incentives, completely reworked their orientation and training, and implemented small changes to meet previously unrecognized needs to create a holistic approach to hiring and retention—and it worked. The agency has seen an impressive decrease in turnover from 2022 to 2023. They project to continue on this trajectory for 2024.⁷

Why?

But why the shortage in the first place? APTA published a report⁸ in March 2023 outlining the transit workforce shortage, its causes, and potential solutions. According to this report, the main issue is simply that the transportation sector has grown at a pace faster than its ability to keep up. Additionally, economic conditions, the pandemic, and “inadequate information” about the shortage’s causes and effects have only exacerbated the problem.

From a nationwide survey of 190 agencies, APTA found the transit workforce shortage to be “widespread and severe” with ninety-six percent of responding agencies experiencing a workforce shortage. The shortage is only expected to worsen as the current workforce retires—forty-three percent of transit workers are over age 55. Historically, transportation agencies have struggled to hire and retain women as well, sometimes due to the perception⁹ of the field and gender bias,¹⁰ among other reasons, creating further limits.

Demands of the Job

The other issue, of course, are the conditions of the job. Younger generations prioritize¹¹ different aspects of employment and work-life balance. This includes putting the feeling that their employer cares about their physical and emotional wellbeing at the forefront of what they are looking for in a workplace. A report¹² from Introducing Youth to American Infrastructure¹³ (iyai+) surveyed people ages 18-25 years old about their interest in transportation positions and the workforce shortage. Respondents identified their top incentives to work as a public transit frontline employee as compensation, including competitive pay and benefits (53.8%) and guaranteed annual pay increases (56.4%), work-life balance (46.8%), and clear career pathways and growth opportunities (36.2%).

Work-life balance also has had a significant shift in accessibility since the pandemic, but—like most nurses, firefighters, and so many other essential workers—bus operators are not able to work remotely.

Like many other essential workers, transit employees face burnout and often resign from the industry altogether. Top reported motivations for leaving the job include mental or physical health (16% of APTA survey¹⁴ respondents) and feeling overworked (14%). Unfortunately, bus operators are also frontline workers in transportation, which means customer service is a significant part of the role, and social tensions and income inequalities¹⁵ have left these frontline workers especially vulnerable to harassment and even assault by transit users.

One report using statistics from the National Transit Database¹⁶ found that assaults on transit workers have tripled since 2008. Transit employees in customer-facing roles, like bus operators, have increasingly been victims of stabbing, spitting, and kicking,¹⁷ and sexual misconduct.¹⁸ There have also been reports of operators being robbed,¹⁹ having urine and hot beverages²⁰ poured on them, being threatened at gunpoint,²¹ and even shot at.²² This issue has to be addressed immediately for the safety of operators. However, even as advocates and policymakers make moves to protect operators such as increasing consequences for assault, reducing the opportunity for assault (by, for example, not making operators responsible for fare enforcement), the problem persists.

Inviting a police presence into transit, for example, which would be a plausible solution for harassment and assault in many scenarios, also creates issues of equity²³ due to increased interactions between law enforcement and transit users. In the U.S., the majority²⁴ (around 60%) of transit users are people of color, with Black/African-American transit users being the greatest number (24%) within this group—individuals from this group are also more than twice²⁵ as likely as white people to be shot and killed by police officers.²⁶ Keeping both operators and riders safe is paramount, and there are a variety of potential solutions being thrown at this critical problem.

For example, the Federal Transit Administration announced a grant last year for \$500,000²⁷ under a cooperative agreement with the University of South Florida for a research project to address the crisis of transit worker assaults. The project will “identify public safety risks for transit workers and riders, determine the most effective mitigation strategies to minimize those risks, and promote the implementation of those strategies.” In the meantime, some have suggested compensating frontline transit workers with hazard pay.²⁸

Pay is another, perhaps more obvious, factor in the transit worker shortage. When surveyed about what job they had taken outside of transit, 39% of former transit workers emphasized the jobs they looked for offered “better benefits, pay, or working hours.”

Efforts to recruit and retain diverse, talented employees both are affected by issues of pay and benefits. Almost half of survey respondents noted “pay and benefits” as the number-one reason that might discourage the application of potential new hires. Other reasons included “inflexible work schedules,” “feeling overworked,” and “physical and verbal abuse from passengers.”

Without a doubt, transit operators are on the front lines of our nation’s critical infrastructure. These workers are essential and need to be treated as such or the shortage and its effects on the transportation system are unlikely to go away. With current retirement and retention rates, they are only likely to get worse.

A Potential Solution: AC Transit’s Incentives & Training Programs

Like the rest of the country, AC Transit faced a significant shortage of bus drivers. Without enough operators, buses run late, routes are more likely to be cut, and the mobility needs of the community cannot sufficiently be met.

AC Transit added significant financial incentives for new operators. With the new plan, implemented October 2022, newly hired bus operators earn \$500 upon graduation from the AC Transit Training & Education Center, \$500 upon completion of 3 months driving after graduation from new bus operator training classes, and \$1,000 upon completion of 12 months of employment from date of hire—a grand total of \$2,000 within the first year. This incentive has the potential to attract new hires and—hopefully—retain them for a solid year (and, again, hopefully much longer).

Other transit agencies have also implemented higher pay and financial incentives to try to tackle the shortage. For example, in 2022, the Michigan Bay Area Transportation Authority²⁹ (BATA) announced a \$10,000³⁰ recruiting incentive for a three-year commitment in an effort to hire more

drivers, dispatchers, and mechanics to meet growing community demand for public transit. Chicago Transit Authority³¹ began offering³² \$1,000 hiring bonuses, plus retention incentives and higher pay. VIA Metropolitan Transit³³ in San Antonio, Texas, increased hiring incentives³⁴ for new drivers.

But this is only half the battle. Fair wages and even ample financial incentives may not be enough to keep people on board if an agency and a community does not support them in other ways. *That is where AC Transit has a unique approach.*

“We really wanted to show new hires what we are about and welcome them into the supportive community that we have here,” said AC Transit Executive Director of Human Resources Sebron Flenaugh, who has been with the agency for nearly 3 years. “And to be a truly supportive community, we had to pause to figure out what new members of our community needed. When we started talking to people and understanding the causes of what had them leaving...that’s when things started to change for the good.”

After some investigation and trial and error, AC Transit began approaching the hiring, training, and retention process holistically and equitably—identifying and meeting the needs not only of the agency and the new hires as employees, but also as people.

What did this look like and how is it different from other approaches? The first change was extending orientation and training to ensure new hires were truly understanding the demands and rewards of the job. Before the changes, orientation lasted a single day and training was nine weeks. An additional week was added to training, and orientation was completely transformed. With the new approach, new hires participate in six full days of orientation include engaging with trainers, the agency leaders, the wellness coordinator, dispatchers, and more.

A Holistic Approach: Transit Operators are People, Too

Flenaugh and others at AC Transit, in the implementation of this new orientation and training, soon discovered that it was *not* necessarily the demands of the job that kept people from taking on the role. Sometimes, it was something much simpler. Like a pair of shoes.

During orientation there are benefits being offered that are usually unavailable until after certification. There are occasions where trainees stopped showing up to training, and when the district reached out to them, it turned out they did not have a proper pair of shoes or a clean shirt. AC Transit now provide shirts and ties to every new operator trainee. They may also provide pants or shoes on a case-by-case basis. The district wants people who are capable and committed—a \$30 pair of shoes should not stop someone from launching their career.

The first day of orientation, agency trainers and HR folks collect information and really get to know these potential new hires as individuals. AC Transit ensures trainees have a way to get to and from the training location, sometimes providing gas cards or BART cards to help trainees reliably arrive on time. They have even provided temporary hotel stays and groceries to help unhoused trainees make the transition to the job. (Clothing is just one barrier that can make obtaining employment challenging³⁵ for people experiencing homelessness.)

This is more than financial incentives—this is empowering people to become part of a community and providing an opportunity to then make a difference in their communities through transit.

AC Transit’s approach also is built with ample opportunities for open communication and feedback. They welcome even the difficult or awkward questions about mandatory drug and alcohol compliance or, perhaps the most critical question of, “When do I get paid?”

On the last day of orientation, new operators meet trainers at the division they are going to be operating out of. They meet with IT to get logged into the system and find out where to get pay stubs. Then they provide feedback to the agency by responding to questions like, “How has your experience with us been so far?” and “What can we do better?”

New operators work with a mentor and begin with only a portion of their eventual route assignment as they ease into the role. Peer mentorship has been shown to be an effective way to improve retention—as well as morale—among transit workers. Research from the Transit Workforce Center³⁶ indicates that operator mentorship programs that pair seasoned bus operators with new ones support mentees and help them be successful in their new positions. For example, a mentorship program from the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA),³⁷ first launched in 2008, helped increase VTA retention rates³⁸ from 80% to around 95%. Similarly, AC Transit has been using mentorship to improve retention rates since 2018. Data³⁹ as of 2020 reveals this agency has had a total of 241 mentees and 27 mentors, resulting in retention improvement from 75% to 88% for new hires.

APTA research indicates that approximately 16% of transit workers leave during training and 20% more leave during initial probationary periods. The stress and sometimes overwhelming nature of starting a new job can be mitigated with the right support. Investing in success from the beginning through strong onboarding practices, as well as gathering information on the success of those onboarding practices, is likely to make a major difference in keeping new hires for the long-term.

“Implementing a week-long new hire orientation was essential for us to ensure employees were effectively onboarded, integrated into the organizational culture, trained on company processes, and equipped with the necessary skills for success. This comprehensive approach not only accelerates the time to productivity but also provides ample time to immerse new hires into our company’s culture, values, and mission. It ensures that they understand not only their roles but also how their contributions align with the broader organizational objectives,” explains Sebron Flenaugh of AC Transit.

AC Transit

A New Approach to Bus Operator Orientation

A **20% increase** in success rate in those who were hired and remained active with the new orientation implemented.

After New Orientation



Before New Orientation



The most recent data from AC Transit shows a whopping 20% increase in success rate in those who were hired and remained active (have not left or been terminated after graduating from the training program). Before the new program 55% of new hires remained, and as of March 2024, 75% of new hires are happy to stick around.

Clearly, the thorough orientation, extensive training and mentorship, and ongoing support from AC Transit sets new bus operators up for success as they grow into their new community.

Conclusion: Invest in People to Invest in Transit

AC Transit's approach—characterized by early investment into new hires, extensive holistic support, financial incentives, and a focus on creating community—is a viable way forward. Transportation struggles with finding and keeping the people we need to make this critical infrastructure safe, efficient, and sustainable. The success of the program so far has spurred AC Transit toward making plans to implement the same model across the board for all positions, not just Bus Operator.

Implementing the week-long new hire orientation and other incentives demonstrates a commitment to nurturing talent, fostering a positive work environment, and driving long-term success for the agency and everyone.

What if the solution is investing in those people?

If we want more people to ride transit⁴⁰, we need to make it an enjoyable, safe, and reliable experience. This means hiring more transit operators and addressing the transit workforce crisis.

Flenaugh from AC Transit noted, “It’s an investment in our people, our culture, and our future.”

Transportation is ever-evolving, but societal shifts in recent years, including work-from-home trends and a harder push for implementing the benefits of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace mean that our industry is being rebuilt, in so many ways, from the ground up. An approach that looks at the whole problem and the whole solution, at the whole person, is the only way we are going to overcome the worker shortage and transform transit to meet the needs of everyone now and in a more diverse, sustainable, and safer future.

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About the Authors

As MTI's Editor and Writer since 2020, Lisa ensures all of MTI's written communication is concise, effective, and accessible. She helped write the grant application for the Mineta Consortium for Equitable, Efficient, and Sustainable Transportation, led by MTI, which was awarded \$10 million in federal funding and \$5 million from regional and state partners. With an MA in English from SJSU, Lisa dedicates herself to using language to advance equity in transportation, education, and every space she can influence.

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