



Transit Workforce Shortage

Root Causes, Potential Solutions, and the Road Ahead

Executive Summary

Public transit providers across North America face a shortage of operators and mechanics during a period of economic instability and reshuffling exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, agencies' ability to respond to the worker shortage has been hampered by inadequate information about its causes and effects. The Transit Workforce Shortage Study builds a framework for APTA, its members, and its partner organizations to better understand the workforce shortage's causes and provides best practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining transit operations workers. The study is comprised of two phases. The interim report, found at www.apta.com/shortage, synthesizes the findings from Phase 1, which included a survey of transit agencies and background research into the macro causes of the shortage.

CAUSES OF THE SHORTAGE

The transit workforce shortage is widespread and severe.

- Ninety-six percent of agencies surveyed reported experiencing a workforce shortage, 84 percent of which said the shortage is affecting their ability to provide service.
- Although the shortage is most acute at agencies serving large urbanized areas and agencies with greater ridership, most agencies across the country report the shortage has forced service reductions regardless of the size of an agency's ridership, service area population, or fleet.

The aging of the transit workforce suggests that agencies will experience a high rate of retirements for the foreseeable future.

- Agencies report that retirees make up 24 percent of all quitting workers; at rural agencies, 34 percent of departures are retirements.
- Forty-three percent of transit workers are over 55, nearly double the percentage of the broader transportation sector.
- The aging of the transit workforce suggests agencies should plan for an increase in the rate of retirements over the next five to 10 years.

Transit agencies face strong competition for workers.

- The post-COVID-19 economic recovery has been characterized by low-unemployment and high job churn, meaning that agencies face more competition for the same pool of potential workers.
- Agencies reported that 45 percent of departing employees left to take jobs outside the transit industry, more than those who retire or left the workforce combined.
- Transit agencies' offers of employment are rejected 35 percent of the time, at more than twice the rate for jobs across all industries.

Agencies report that concerns about work schedules and compensation are the leading reasons why workers quit.

- The survey of agencies indicates that concerns about schedule and compensation were responsible for more departures than assault and harassment or concern about contracting COVID-19.
- Most agencies said that schedule and compensation are leading to more departures today than before the pandemic.

A complex regulatory framework is hampering agencies' ability to fill vacancies.

- Rules about drug and alcohol testing, Commercial Driver's License (CDL) requirements, criminal background checks, and driving records extend the hiring process and exclude otherwise qualified applicants.
- APTA and its partners should advocate for regulation reforms at the federal and state levels while ensuring that transit operators are well-qualified.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO RELIEVE THE SHORTAGE OF TRANSIT WORKERS?

Increasing compensation is about more than increasing wages.

- Increasing compensation begins with increasing wages for new and current employees, but there is more that agencies can do to attract and retain workers.
- Agencies often provide benefits packages that are competitive with or better than what workers would get in the private sector. Agencies should calculate the average value of those benefits so that applicants and employees are aware of their total compensation when they are making employment decisions.
- Some agencies have explored other forms of compensation, such as acquiring and providing worker housing and offering student loan and tuition benefits.

Agencies need to get creative to improve worker schedules.

- Concerns about schedule were identified as one of the most important factors leading workers to quit, but most agencies report not having taken steps to improve worker schedules.
- Shift differentials can encourage and reward workers for taking tougher shifts.
- Where practicable, agencies ought to explore changing their processes for rostering to improve the schedules of newer workers.
- Collective bargaining agreements often constrain agencies' ability to change rostering procedures. Nevertheless, given the centrality of schedule to the workforce shortage, agencies should explore moving from a "cafeteria approach," where each driver picks their runs and days off in order of seniority, to a weekly rostering approach, where agencies minimize the difference between operator's workweeks by combining daily runs to create complete weeks of work for operators.

Improving workplace culture is key to attracting younger workers.

- To appeal to a new generation of transit workers, agencies must take steps to make operations positions an attractive step into a career in transit. That means, among other factors, establishing pathways for advancement and professional growth.
- Creating employee recognition programs and improving amenities at agency facilities can help boost morale and retention.

Agencies can take steps to improve their recruiting and hiring processes.

- Some of the factors driving the transit worker shortage are long term and unlikely to reverse themselves in the near future. Therefore, agencies should invest in their hiring and recruiting capacities.
- Agencies should make the application process as simple as possible—from helping applicants obtain their CDL permits, to prominently displaying a mobile-friendly employment application on their websites, to making same-day offers at hiring events.
- Conditional employment offers—when an employee begins training pending the completion of background checks and other processes—can help keep interested applicants from disengaging from the hiring process.
- Agencies should establish new workforce pipelines, such as internship programs and relationships with high schools.

Governments and partner organizations have an important role to play in addressing the transit workforce shortage.

- Federal agencies can support agencies by implementing the Government Accountability Office's recommendation for transit workforce development and exploring the creation of federal program to pay for CDL training for transit operators.
- State Departments of Transportation (state DOTs) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) should consider how to integrate transit-specific workforce development programs into transportation planning projects and state and local educational institutions should establish relationships with transit agencies in the interest of creating employment pipelines.
- Transit labor organizations and their members should consider how they can support workforce recruitment and retention through apprenticeship, peer mentoring, and leadership advancement programs.
- At the local and national levels, unions should rigorously evaluate seniority-based practices and compare them to alternatives that would potentially increase younger member participation in both the workforce and union activities.