



# TRANSIT WORKFORCE READINESS GUIDE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Photos (clockwise from top left): LA Metro, TransLink, Sound Transit, Southeast Transportation Workforce Center



AMERICAN  
PUBLIC  
TRANSPORTATION  
ASSOCIATION

APTAU  
Delivering the Future-Ready Workforce

# FROM THE TASK FORCE CHAIRS

When we think of workforce readiness, we are reminded of a quote from former President Barack Obama:

**“Our nation derives strength from the diversity of its population and from its commitment to equal opportunity for all. We are at our best when we draw on the talents of all parts of our society, and our greatest accomplishments are achieved when diverse perspectives are brought to bear to overcome our greatest challenges.”**

— BARACK OBAMA, EXECUTIVE ORDER 13583: ESTABLISHING A COORDINATED GOVERNMENT-WIDE INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE

Now more than ever, these words ring true, because investment in a diverse, inclusive, trained and educated workforce is critical for the future of the transportation industry and for our nation's economy and global competitiveness. We were honored to be appointed by former APTA Chair Nuria I. Fernandez to lead one of her key initiatives on workforce readiness: developing a pipeline for high school students into the public transit industry. We led a committed and diverse task force representing transit agencies, business members, academia, industry and non-industry partners who contributed to this initiative.

This guide is designed as an online executive resource, structured to assist organizations with attracting high school students from underserved communities into entry-level transit career opportunities and building a diverse talent pipeline to sustain our industry. The guide also includes a step-by-step outline that provides industry leaders and staff with an overview of the key strategies and actions to develop and promote these programs.

The public transit industry has a key role to play as an essential service during the challenges of the pandemic, as a catalyst for economic recovery, and as a change agent to place social and racial equity and inclusion in the forefront. This guide reinforces the importance of workforce readiness programs as a necessary component of our nation's recovery. As industry leaders, we share a collective responsibility to create and promote opportunities to build a diverse and sustainable future workforce.



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**F**ormer APTA Chair Nuria Fernandez identified workforce readiness as one of her key initiatives, and APTA has developed the Transit Workforce Readiness Guide as a resource for the transit industry. The guide was developed under the direction of APTA’s Workforce Readiness Task Force and is based on interviews with 35 organizations, including transit agencies, academic institutions, private sector organizations, and other partners.

The primary goal of the guide is to help transit industry executives and the industry as a whole to better market transit as a career, with an emphasis on programs and outreach to attract disadvantaged high school and young college students regarding viable job opportunities in the transit industry. The guide showcases existing transit industry programs and shows how students can have meaningful job opportunities in the transit industry.

The guide is organized into three parts:

- **Part One: Creating a Workforce Readiness Program** contains an introduction to workforce readiness issues in the transit industry. It describes why APTA developed this guide, including why it’s important to focus on workforce readiness opportunities for high school and young college students, particularly disadvantaged students. It also describes five steps to implementing a workforce readiness initiative.
- **Part Two: Case Studies** contains findings from 35 interviews with executives from transit agencies and other organizations. These interviews identify existing programs and best practices related to workforce readiness.
- **Part Three: Sample Materials** includes materials provided by interviewees to support workforce readiness initiatives. These include examples related to internship and apprenticeship programs, recruiting, training and entry-level jobs.

This executive summary contains key information related to each part of the guide.



## Part One: Creating a Workforce Readiness Program

### INTRODUCTION

Even in the most challenging times, visionary transit leaders understand the importance and benefits of investing in a sustainable workforce—to secure the industry’s future, as well as to empower others to have a brighter future. Now more than ever, the transit industry must reach out to high school students and young people by introducing them to transit and its many career opportunities. Building a new generation of a public transportation workforce requires new models, new partnerships, new toolkits and new approaches.

Transit agencies are transitioning to applications of new technologies, new energy sources, new models of service and collaborations through nontraditional partnership models. This calls for a nimble workforce that brings a range of knowledge, skills and accumulated experiences from customer service to technology applications.

This report focuses on one promising strategy for beginning to resolve this workforce crisis: focusing transit awareness messages and training on high school and young college students. The reason for this is fourfold:

**These students currently have limited awareness of transit as a career field.** Although many jobs in the transit sector should be appealing to teenagers and young adults—as they are green jobs on the cutting edge of technology—transit jobs simply aren’t on their radar.

**At this age, students often have clearly defined interests but have not yet solidified their future plans.** Students with an existing interest in mechanical or electronics programs are often delighted to find that transit is on the cutting edge of these fields and has state-of-the-art facilities. And they are universally surprised by the wide variety of jobs available.

**The ability to hire and train young employees is a win for transit agencies.** Due to budget pressures, many transit agencies prefer to hire workers at the entry level when possible, rather than hiring midcareer professionals with higher salary demands. To do that, these agencies train and promote from within to fill management and midlevel positions whenever possible, eventually creating an externally advertised job opening at the entry level.

**Understanding the potential of a transit career helps keep students on track.** High school students who are not bound for a traditional four-year-college—whether because of grades, economic circumstances, involvement with the justice system or other disadvantages—often resign themselves to a future without many opportunities and may drop out of high school. Getting the word out that many good-paying transit careers do not require a bachelor’s degree, and also may offer on-the-job training or tuition reimbursement, can give them the motivation to stay engaged in their education.

Transit agencies have always existed to serve their communities, in the form of improved mobility, environmental benefits, reduced congestion and increased safety, among other things. But an often-overlooked advantage of having transit in a community is the upward mobility that transit careers can provide to the local

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population. To ensure that these benefits reach all members of society, and to ensure that the transit workforce reflects the demographics of its surrounding community, many agencies have enlisted the help of a range of partners that provide services to underrepresented communities, people with disabilities, veterans, women, the underemployed, single parents and many other disadvantaged populations.

## IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

This research identified five steps to create a successful workforce retention program to attract and retain younger workers.

1. Identify needs and opportunities.
2. Form outreach partnerships.
3. Develop and implement programs.
4. Close the loop with entry-level jobs.
5. Evaluate hiring, onboarding and retention.

### Step 1: Identify needs and opportunities.

For many agencies, the first stage of developing a workforce readiness program is to fully understand the problems they are trying to solve. For example, agencies may want to estimate how many retirements they might be facing in the next five or 10 years and in what roles, look at retention by job category, determine the current demographic breakdown of employees to uncover representation gaps, and inventory entry-level job descriptions to understand structural barriers that impact recruitment.

Once the agency understands its needs, it can consider various avenues for exposing young people to transit and transit careers through programs that will be a win-win-win—for the agency, student and community. Many agency leaders interviewed for this report suggested starting small when possible to help get initial buy-in from executive leadership, unions, community leaders, parents and students. Once a program has achieved some positive results, those can be publicized and celebrated and the program scaled up as appropriate.

Some opportunities to consider:

- Ridership awareness programs are a natural place to target high school students and transit-dependent communities.
- Transit agencies would benefit from doing a better job of articulating their value to the community.
- Transit tours can be an eye-opener.
- Internships, pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships serve multiple purposes.

## Step 2: Form outreach partnerships.

Once the agency fully understands its own needs and opportunities, it should consider the needs and opportunities present in the community; the best way to do that, agency leaders say, is through partnerships.

The place to start is to talk to the partners the agency already has, to see how they can be expanded to include workforce development. It's also valuable to understand—through ridership surveys or other means—the populations the agency currently serves, and to partner with community-based organizations that serve those same populations.

## Step 3: Develop and implement programs.

Once an agency and its partners have identified a workforce readiness program that they're interested in starting, they need to develop and implement the program carefully to give it the best chance of success. Consider the following recommendations from stakeholders interviewed for this report:

- Identify as many stakeholders as possible, and turn them into advocates.
- Involve existing employees, and train them to be mentors.
- Remember the goals of the program.
- Start by educating parents and teachers.
- Focus on awareness.
- Provide transferable skills.

## Step 4: Close the loop with entry-level jobs.

If a workforce readiness program is successful, it will begin to create a pool of potential workers who not only have some awareness and experience with the agency or industry, but who are also known quantities for hiring managers. But sometimes that's where those students find a dead end: There just isn't an entry-level job to offer.

A strategy many transit agencies are exploring is to create even lower-level jobs with clear pathways into entry-level positions that currently have structural barriers, such as the requirement for a CDL.



## Step 5: Evaluate hiring, onboarding and retention.

To meet the needs and expectations of younger workers, the hiring and onboarding processes need to be drastically streamlined. Today's candidates expect a seamless experience when applying for a job, and they expect to be able to apply online, or even via a mobile device. They also expect the process to move rapidly and transparently.

Many transit agencies have experimented with ways to make hiring simpler, including bringing tablet computers to job fairs so students can fill out their applications on the spot. Several agencies also conduct job interviews at this type of event, both to give students the experience and to save time in the hiring process.

Best practices for onboarding young employees, developing a culture that embraces them and creating better retention for the whole organization include the following:

- Onboarding should connect employees with the agency's culture.
- Ask all new employees about their needs in a non-stigmatizing way.
- Assign young employees a mentor or a buddy.
- Create a culture of inclusiveness.
- Implement bonuses and referral programs.
- Understand the expectations of young employees.
- Engage with employees throughout their career.
- Emphasize internal promotion.
- Update performance evaluations to focus on goals.
- Make training a budget priority.
- Create a culture of learning.

## CALL TO ACTION

Developing a workforce readiness program can be a huge undertaking, but it also can begin incrementally, with the agency building on each of its successes. The techniques employed by the organizations interviewed for this report—assessing needs and opportunities, reaching out to partners, developing awareness programs, focusing on hiring at the entry level, developing employees through training and educational opportunities, and improving hiring practices and retention—have produced tangible benefits for the agencies, their employees, and the surrounding communities alike.

Visionary transit leaders have a clear call to action: to reach out to young people to introduce them to the many careers available in the transit industry. Generation Z has many assets to bring to the future transit workforce, with skills such as adaptability, willingness to learn and technical savvy that can help to advance the industry. And they are likely to find great rewards in transit careers, too.

## Part Two: Case Studies

Part Two contains 35 case studies, describing the work of academic institutions, partners, private-sector organizations and transit agencies to develop, implement and promote workforce readiness initiatives. Each case study contains a brief description, followed by detailed information on programs and examples. Each case also contains links to additional resources, including external links to information on websites and internal links to resources that appear in Part Three of the guide. Selected highlights include the following:

- **Chicago Transit Authority** has a successful eight-week summer intern program for young high school students. The program aims to teach both business and professionalism, and ends with students presenting their capstone projects.



- **Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority** has implemented a Career Pathways Program to promote employee development through every level of the organization. LA Metro uses a strategy of “underfilling” positions by promoting and hiring from within, to create jobs at lower levels within the organization. It is also building a transportation-themed high school in the city.
- **METRO Regional Transit Authority** has employed a strategy of hiring employees for “soft skills” such as customer service and does its own training in-house to enable candidates to obtain a CDL.
- **Monterey-Salinas Transit** has implemented a system of bonuses for employees making successful referrals for new hires, as well as for new drivers who reach milestones of 1,000 and 2,000 hours on the road to improve retention.
- **MTA New York City Transit** offers a paid transit electrical apprentice and transit mechanical apprentice program, and also works with a high school dedicated entirely to transit career training.
- **Pierce Transit** markets its culture of promoting from within, including a CEO who started as a bus driver. It partners with local high schools and colleges to make bus passes available to students to increase their exposure to transit.
- **San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit** works with community partner Cyprus Mandela to identify and train job candidates for hard-to-fill skilled trade positions such as track workers. The program has helped to diversify its workforce.
- **Toronto Transit Commission** hosted a Trades Expo for interested applicants, including on-the-spot interviews with hiring managers.
- **Jacobs** responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic by creating a virtual experience to replace its in-person recruiting efforts. Its interactive Virtual Recruitment Booth lets candidates explore information about the company at their own pace in a video game-like atmosphere.
- **Stadler US** has worked to bring the successful dual-education model employed in Switzerland to Salt Lake City. Its Talent Ready Apprenticeship Connection allows students coming out of high school to obtain a debt-free college education while apprenticing at Stadler.
- **Los Angeles Trade-Technical College** helped create a Transportation Youth Academy to introduce middle and high school students to transportation, and specifically to transit. The summer program is conducted in flexible modules.
- **Southeast Transportation Workforce Center** launched a collaborative effort to create a Transportation-STEM Academy for high school students in Memphis. The academy showcases the intersection between transportation and STEM careers, and prepares students to immediately enter the transportation workforce.

