

HELP WANTED: TRANSIT WORKERS

Addressing the transit workforce shortage

Why we're working on this issue

A strong transit workforce is crucial to keep our communities moving — transit workers connect people to jobs, education, healthcare, and essential services. They don't just help people reach their destinations; they foster a sense of connection and empower individuals to participate fully in society.

But right now, the transit workforce is facing an unprecedented shortage. A recent report found that more than nine in 10 public transit agencies were having difficulty hiring new employees. A shortage of transit workers can leave agencies unable to deliver needed service or use available funding. This leads to decreases in frequency and reliability, and therefore people may be less likely to take transit or vote to fund transit.

One of Transportation Choices' top policy priorities is helping to address the transit workforce shortage. We want to gain a comprehensive understanding of the contributing factors, learning from existing research, as well as from current transit workers and transit agencies across the state. We aim to identify whether there are interventions, both short-term and long-term, that could effectively attract, train, and retain a diverse, inclusive, and thriving transit workforce. This knowledge will serve as the foundation for any efforts to educate the public, support transit agencies, and collaborate with policymakers to develop and fund effective solutions.

What we're asking for

Policymakers can help address the transit workforce shortage. Here's how:

- **Continue exploring barriers and possible solutions** for worker shortages.
- **Pass legislation and provide funding to support agencies** in recruiting, hiring, and retaining workers.
- **Address forthcoming recommendations from the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) study** to improve CDL access, training, and certification.

What we've learned about the workforce shortage

An aging workforce is contributing to the worker shortage. A substantial portion of transit workers are approaching retirement age, and in 2021, the average transit operator age was 53 years vs. the U.S. worker average of 42 years. This demographic shift means we must attract and retain a new generation of talent to maintain a robust workforce.

Another challenge is the intense competition for qualified drivers and mechanics. The private trucking and e-commerce delivery sectors, for instance, often offer higher wages and more flexible schedules, drawing some individuals away from transit careers.

Certain barriers hinder recruiting and retaining transit workers, including challenging work schedules, demanding work conditions, drug testing requirements, and lengthy hiring processes. The American Public Transportation Association's "Transit Workforce Shortage" Report cites compensation and work schedule as key attrition factors.

Progress so far

Transit agencies are acting quickly to address the workforce shortage, and encouraging signs of progress are emerging. Many agencies have increased starting pay, hiring bonuses, and current employee pay to attract and retain talent. Additionally, more agencies have begun providing a range of benefits such as tuition assistance, healthcare for families, and childcare support.

Transit agencies across the nation have also made changes such as implementing new tools for shift coordination, enhancing break rooms, offering mentoring programs, providing mental health counseling, developing safety training protocols, forming partnerships with military bases and academia to expand the talent pool, and streamlining the hiring process to reduce inefficiencies.

We look forward to learning more about how we can support tackling these challenges!

Further reading

- "Transit Workforce Shortage." American Public Transportation Association, March 2023
- "Bus Operators in Crisis." TransitCenter, July 2022

To learn more about our ongoing work on this issue, please contact Hester Serebrin at hester@transportationchoices.org.

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