

The Transit Workforce: A Path Forward

Introduction

DVRPC and Temple University embarked on a research project in 2019 to better understand the key systematic challenges faced by the region's three primary transit agencies: SEPTA, NJ Transit, and PATCO. This document is the culmination of various research efforts. Staff engaged in first- and second-hand literature research and held two stakeholder meetings in May 2019 and June 2020 to discuss the primary challenges and possible actions by the transit agencies and/or workforce development practitioners. Most importantly, the research team conducted over 20 interviews with identified stakeholders in order to take a deeper dive on the perspective of the problem. This work was published in a document, *What we Think we Know*, March 2020. The research and outreach were based on identified issues prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This plan is intended as a guide for possible opportunities and solutions for the transit agencies to address identified challenges. The opportunities are broken down into the themes that were identified in *What we Think we Know* and prioritized by participating stakeholders as areas that need to be addressed in the short term to ensure long-term success: Pathways, Pipeline, Perception, and Process. Note the opportunities were identified in May 2019 followed by a June 2020 meeting with stakeholders to develop solutions. Given the current implications of the pandemic, an additional meeting with the transit agencies was convened in December 2020 to further define potential short-term tasks and solutions.

The following summarizes the most agreed upon opportunities to address prioritized challenges:

- Strive to break down the internal silos within transit agencies and potential outside partners.
- Increase training/career development at all levels of the organization.
- Share responsibility among transit agencies toward solving common issues such as establishing pathways with a clear pipeline.
- Conduct research to better understand workforce trends among different cohorts impacting employee availability.
- Accept accountability and establish metrics to gauge hiring and retention success.
- Collaborate and coordinate with other transit agencies to share best practices and success stories.

Implementation of the outlined opportunities requires strong commitment and collaboration between all parties—employees, management, workforce development practitioners, educators, and community members. Through our research, we have found that all stakeholders consider training and career development essential to the professional growth of the transit workforce and for employees at all levels to be prepared with the skill sets needed to meet emerging challenges. Further, to ensure the best outcomes, transit agency leadership should be accountable, effective change agents, and advocates for professional, respectful, and fair work environments for all types of transit personnel.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

On December 16, 2020, the research team met with selected individuals at NJ Transit, PATCO, and SEPTA to discuss the action plan and how COVID-19 has impacted this project's previous findings. As is now well-known, at the end of March 2020, both New Jersey and Pennsylvania Governor's ordered aggressive social distancing measures to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. These actions brought government offices, schools, businesses, and travel to a halt, resulting in sharp decline in transit ridership along with a pivot in normal operations for all transit

staff. Safety and job retention became new focal points. Representatives of the transit agencies acknowledged that the pandemic's long-term impact is still unknown but thinking about continuity of operations is still underway. For example, recruiting, hiring, and ensuring a steady pipeline of new transit workers remained important over the last six months, even while the process to do so changed.

Transit agency reaction to the identified solutions is shown in the action plan below. The shaded boxes received positive reaction as possible short-term actions by the transit agencies. The largest unknown to the transit agencies is the recovery of transit ridership and continued federal support for operations. To date, the transit agencies have been mostly operating as normal, but a continued reduction in funding may result in layoffs and service reduction. According to the transit agencies, the COVID-19 pandemic has not impacted the pathways and pipeline solutions previously proposed/undertaken but the methods of hiring have constraints and innovations have organically occurred.

Pathways

A career pathway is a series of structured and connected education programs and support services that enable students, often while they are working, to advance over time to better jobs and higher levels of education and training. To successfully advance individuals, a pathway should include: access to needed basis skills in the transit industry, seamless transition to entry-level skills training and upgrade training, internships with employment guarantees, and social supports throughout the process, as needed.

Opportunities	Pandemic Solutions	Potential Partners	Action Discussed
1. Build bridges between basic skills and higher-level academic and vocational courses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Engage employers in developing training that meets the labor market demand in the transit industry. Train individuals with needed skills and skill maintenance. Explore a wide variety of state and community resources for funding to expand training. Work with existing college and vocational programs on developing clear curriculums that address basic skills needs. 	Workforce Development K-12 Educators Department of Labor (Federal and State)	1. STEM education can be applied to transit industry. This needs to be communicated through all partners and marketing materials.
2. Create specific credit earning programs at colleges for students to work toward a certificate program.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Allow trainees to earn credit toward a degree. Expand social support services for students while pursuing degree and certificate programs. 	Colleges/vocational schools	This was not specifically discussed on 12/16/2020.
3. Develop community and regional partnerships.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Work collaboratively at every level to pool resources and build meaningful pathways. Utilize a neutral party facilitator to elicit agreement on common issues that may be solved together to make transit a key employer for the region. Identify local and hyper-local community groups as part of the process to close the information gap about working for the transit agency. 	Transit Agencies Workforce Development K-12 Educators Colleges/Universities Vocational Schools Parents Philanthropic Community Transportation-related nonprofits DVRPC	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Coordination and group exchange would be beneficial as they serve the same population and overlap in some services. A regional transit group has started meeting since the pandemic started. This is a monthly meeting that includes transit providers from other metro areas. It is a forum to share best practices such as sub groups on cleaning best practices. All 3 transit agencies indicated they are members of the APTA Health & Safety Commitments Program and are working to implement national cleaning standards as well as be part of the conversation with other transit agencies.
4. Create mentor programs and social supports to employees.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Team up seasoned employees with less experienced employees for training, hands-on knowledge transfer, and support through the assimilation process. Consider health coverage for trainees while completing training and/or certification programs. Provide 24-hour childcare to employees and trainees. 	Transit Agencies Human Resource Professionals Childcare Support Systems Healthcare Support Systems Transportation-related nonprofits Workforce Development nonprofits WIBs	This was not specifically discussed on 12/16/2020. Child care remains an issue through the pandemic because of social distancing measures.

Pipeline

A successful pipeline is a ready pool of talented individuals who are qualified and ready to fill relevant roles in the organization. A sector-based pipeline should meet the unique needs of each agency and the community in which it operates. To successfully find new talent, a pipeline should focus new talent by cohort and task, understand what skills may be transferrable from another career, align strategies with milestones, and start transit curriculums earlier in the K-12 education system.

Opportunities	Solutions	Potential Partners	Action Discussed
1. Focus new talent search by cohort and tasks.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop millennials and Gen Z to send them out as ambassadors to recruit. 2. Create a narrative that connects organizational goals and what is expected of staff to attract younger workers into the transit field. 3. Employers and their partners should develop a value-stream map that reflects the talent development process for critical positions—from career awareness through onboarding and retention. The value-stream map is a visual tool that displays all critical steps in the process and quantifies the time and effort taken at each stage. 4. Expand transit employee search to military veterans, woman, returning citizens and populations of disadvantage. 5. Work with community-based organizations (CBOs) and nonprofits to bring awareness of job and training opportunities down to the community level. 	K-12 Educators Colleges/Universities Transit Agencies (HR) Workforce Development Professionals Social Media influencers Career Guidance Counselors Employers Transportation-related nonprofits Workforce Development nonprofits WIBs	1. Veterans are trained in self-management and respect for authority, thereby having many skills that can be transferred to the transit industry. This is a target market.
2. Align pipeline strategies with incentives at various milestones.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fully understand the strengths and comparative advantages of jobs within the transit industry as well as constraints and rules surrounding union employees. 2. Prioritize the transit industry's most pressing staffing needs. 3. Develop performance measures/metrics for each strategy to effectively measure success. 4. Provide rewards-based performance indicators. 5. Clearly explain/spell out the path from entry level through apprenticeship to employment to promotion. Provide details about incentives and expectations. 	Transit Agencies (Human Resources) Workforce Development Professionals WIBs	This was not specifically discussed at the on 12/16/2020.
3. Lobby school districts to incorporate curriculums that align with the transit industry's future workforce needs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build awareness—starting in middle school or earlier—of the real-life labor market opportunities within the region. 2. Include vocational and other trade-credit programs as part of high school education paths as an alternative to a college-bound education path. 3. Explore availability of grants to fund development of recruitment and training programs that address hard-to-fill positions and specific trades needed for system expansion. 	K-12 School Districts Parents High School Counselors Transportation-related nonprofits Workforce Development nonprofits Federal legislators (education and labor)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transit agencies are interested in the transit high school model and needed training for high school level students. 2. Need to break barriers with K-12 educators and bring industry into traditional curriculums. Transit representatives used to go to schools but this practice has stopped due to the pandemic.

Perception

The transit industry's recruitment crisis, across roles, is well documented. Research revealed that the transit industry has a reputation of not paying well, is insular and bureaucratic, only hires from within, and turns young talent away. Research and individual interviews with transit industry professionals quickly note that the industry can provide for life-sustaining employment and meet the needs of a younger workforce. To reverse the perception issue, whether real or perceived, awareness both of the jobs in the transit industry and the difficulty in penetrating and navigating the system to get them needs to be addressed. The perception problem provides the greatest opportunity for collaboration, regionally and nationally.

Opportunities	Solutions	Potential Partners	Action Discussed
1. Collaborate on a regional campaign about working for the transit agency.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create talking points that resonate with the target talent pool. This will be different for each position. 2. Highlight the inherent benefit of working for the transit agency and its impact on the economy, climate change, and social justice. 3. Develop a shared language among the region's transit agencies describing hiring requirements and pathways to advancing within the industry. 4. Explore a regional application process for similar positions that must be hired by all transit agencies. 5. Engage in shared marketing campaigns. 	Transit Agencies Workforce Development Professionals DVRPC TMAs Philanthropic Community Employers WIBs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Need a national campaign about the transit industry. 3. The pandemic has created a "fear" of riding transit because of human interaction. A campaign is needed to reverse this. 2. Transit industry requires a Commercial Driver License (CDL) and while many potential employees are obtaining their CDL, they wish to work for delivery services such as Amazon or UPS due to contactless interactions.
2. Promote the transit industry as a clean and safe work environment.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use pictures to illustrate to existing and potential employees that the transit industry is clean and safe. Prioritize sanitation practices during times of concern. 2. Invest in cleaning products and protection for current and potential employees. This perception starts with the application process. 	Transit Agencies (Human Resources) (Marketing) Workforce Development Professionals DVRPC TMAs Philanthropic Community Employers WIBs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transit agencies have spent significant time retraining staff on proper cleaning procedures (with hazardous chemicals) as well as dealing with conflict resolution when riders do not obey social distancing rules. This has spurred innovation for the transit agencies. 2. Through the retraining of staff, new skills and approaches have been acquired, taught, and institutionalized. The transit agencies felt that this could be the start of other innovations for staff.
3. Work with Workforce Development partners on searching for candidates with current technology skills and manage transitions to new technologies.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Be proactive about changing technologies within the industry. 2. Allow for education about new technology and train employees on new equipment. 3. Post monthly performance metrics at worksites and on the internal web access system, so employees see progress that is being made. 	Transit Agencies (IT) Transportation Specialists Start ups WIBs	This was not specifically discussed on 12/16/2020. However, continuous education is underway and has evolved onto a virtual platform.
4. Incorporate the agency's vision and values into communication and performance measures for all staff.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ensure that the agency's vision and values are created by all employees at all job levels to ensure buy-in. 2. Monitor and track the progression of employees through individualized development plans and adherence to the agency's values. 3. Offer a point-based system to get better schedules and shifts for new employees. 	Transit Agency (Human Resources) Employees	This was not specifically discussed on 12/16/2020.

Process

Traditional processes controlled by human resources often includes recruitment, hiring, training, orientation, evaluation, promotion, layoff, benefits administration, performance management, and employee relations. Effectiveness of these processes is often difficult to manage and measure. Based on feedback collected, process improvements should focus on streamlining the application process, focusing on visual aids and meaningful employment engagement, offering training opportunities to all employees, and focusing on employment health and wellness.

Opportunities	Solutions	Potential Partners	Action Discussed
1. Streamline the application process.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Update job descriptions with a focus on competency-based hiring and promotion practices. 2. Ensure timely and clear communication for candidates that includes acknowledgement of the application, next steps in the process, and how to follow up with human resources for support or help. 3. Host social events for potential candidates to make them feel relaxed about the process. 4. Provide physical space (with computers or tablets) for applicants that do not have a smart phone or broadband. 	Transit Agencies (Human Resources) (IT Staff)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More folks interested in transit who would not have been before, because of high unemployment. Now with virtual interviews, easier to interview for those already employed (flexible--during lunch, evening, etc.). This is recruiting more (open houses resulted in low numbers of recruits). Virtual interviews get more in-depth answers, get to know candidates better. SEPTA still getting many applications, but cannot move as fast. 2. The new virtual hiring process has worked so well it may become policy.
2. Focus on retention through visuals and meaningful employee engagement.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Invest in realistic onboarding practices that prepare new employees for a typical day. They need to know the intricate details that pertain to either the changing schedule (you will have the worse shifts for X amount of time, etc.) or changing location (you will now be needed on a suburban route rather than a city route). Provide videos online about a day in the life of a particular position. 2. Promote and explain the daily expectations of the job and career progression process within the agency at the time of interview in order to ensure a clear understanding of what a career may look like at the transit agency, i.e., it takes 2 years and an outstanding managerial review to move to the next classification. Show an example of an internal job announcement that is a promotional opportunity. 3. Start a public forum that provides an opportunity for employees to engage in dialogue with similarly situated staff or managers and equips them with information and ideas that can be shared. 4. Consider rotating promising staff between departments to fast track toward management. 5. Establish succession planning with a cross-section of staff to identify critical positions where the departure of talent poses risk for the agency. 	Transit Agencies (Marketing Staff) (Executive Management) TMAs K-12 Educators Colleges/Universities	
3. Offer training opportunities to existing and potential employees.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide training/career development at all levels of the agency, including e-learning courses, classroom instruction, coaching, and mandatory training for supervisors and managers (existing and future). 2. Partner with nontraditional curriculum providers that can provide short-term certificate programs, requiring less formal school time. 	Transit Agencies (Marketing Staff) (Executive Management) TMAs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Training for new conductors is now limited due to social distancing. Transit agency is limited to the number of students at one time.

<p>4. Strengthen employee focus on health and wellness and develop programs to alleviate job-related stress of meeting the demands of a highly schedule-driven environment.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Look to transit high schools and academies and incubators to create impactful apprenticeships and internships that are transferable between industries. 4. Develop rotational assignments between headquarters and field assignments so employees can gain additional skills and perspective of the overall operations. 1. Incorporate new workplace trends and generational issues into training for first-line supervisors to foster a better understanding of how these issues may impact employees. 2. Review feasibility of increased counseling/advisory sessions to address minor time and attendance violations. 3. Examine applicability of flextime options and greater use of alternative assignments to alleviate stress. 	<p>Transit Agencies (Human Resources) DVRPC TMAs Insurance Companies</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Staff (office) has been working from home since the beginning of the pandemic. It has proven work from home is an option for staff. Many will want this work life balance. 2. This is a flex time option that can be offered. How to balance this with operators and conductors who must be on site.
---	--	--	--

Successful Examples of Pathways, Pipelines, Process, and Regional Partnerships

Below are successful programs based on each of the four themes. While they may not be related to the transit industry directly, there are lessons that can be applied to a new program for the transit industry.

Pathways

Operated through the University City District (UCD), the [West Philadelphia Skills Initiative](#) is a job training program that works with employers to create a customized pipeline training program for a variety of industries. Staff engages in workforce services such as employer engagement, recruitment and assessment, customized solutions, interview set up and job placement support to the neighborhoods of West Philadelphia. In 2019, the program had 159 participants with 97 percent placed with employers earning an average hourly wage over \$14.00. Since 2011, at least 82 percent of the program’s participants retained their employment for at least 12 months.

Through a partnership with the Lenfest Foundation, Temple University’s North Philadelphia Workforce Initiative, and Temple University Harrisburg, [Congreso de Latinos Unidos](#) offers a variety of training program and human services pathway program through enrollment at Harcum at Congreso Early Childhood Education Associates Degree program. The program allows students to prepare for the human services industry with an opportunity to earn 7 college credits. Students are provided support services such as professional development workshops and internship placements. Available to residents in Eastern North Philadelphia, CLU also offers a licensed tractor trailer driver (CDLA) Certificate Program.

Pipeline

Located in Silver Spring, MD, the [Transportation Learning Center \(Nonprofit\)](#) builds labor-management partnerships to improve organizational performance, expand the workforce skills and abilities, and establish pathways for career advancement. Funded by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), U.S. Department of Labor, and Transit Cooperative Research Program, the TLC has sponsored and supported local and statewide training programs and partnerships nationwide and has helped to provide over 27,000 training opportunities for transit mechanics. TLC

focuses many of their efforts to help transit organizations research and evaluate workforce investments, collaborate with other transit agencies to establish national training standards, solidify career ladder programs for transit trainees and students, and clearly define career pathways in the transit industry.

Developed through a collaborative partnership with the Department of Education and New York City (NYC) Transit, [Transit Tech High School](#), provides an opportunity for students to gain technical skills to enter the transit workforce and places graduates with New York area companies, notably New York City Transit Authority, Long Island Railroad, Scholars at Work, and Workorce1. Students have the opportunity to follow 4 different learning paths: transit systems, networks, technology, and software.

Transit Tech High School's pipeline success relies on the collaboration of several partners including the New York Citywide School to Work Alliance, CUNY College of Technology and the Workforce One Scholars to Work Institute. Each plays a significant part in providing everything from marketing expertise for the articulation redesign to an internship program for seniors and an apprenticeship program for graduates. In 2019, the school had a 71 percent graduation rate and 54 percent earned a professional certificate. Other metro areas have developed transit schools including Los Angeles Metro to Building Boarding School.

Process

[The Transit Virtual Career Network](#) is an online career portal and database funded by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), U.S. Department of Labor, the Employment and Training Administration, and the American Association of Community Colleges and developed to help Americans find good-paying, family-supporting positions in growing industries. The Transit VCN leverages an existing VCN platform, which includes a Healthcare VCN and a Green Economy VCN. By working together, interested employees can go to one website to learn about the industry, necessary skills and training, and job opportunities.

Regional Partnerships and Collaboration

SEPMA, the [Southeastern Pennsylvania Manufacturing Alliance](#) is a collaborative of regional manufacturers that work with educators, workforce development and community organizations to place workers into the manufacturing industry. Like the transit industry, this collaborative partnership was developed in response to the changing world of new technology and lean manufacturing process as well as skilled labor shortages, automation, security, and attracting new workers. This regional partnership ensures that everyone is working together toward the same goal and helps regional manufacturing employers leverage the latest advancements in technology, address the challenges together and continue upward momentum. The site also provides information on pathways for people interested in a manufacturing career.

Conclusion

Due to demographic shifts, demands for increasingly sophisticated skills, gaps in training, and industry perceptions, DVRPC began to research causes and possible solutions for the transit industry to address these workforce and human capital issues that are critical to the continuing success of the transit industry. Through a partnership created with the Center for Executive Education at the Fox School of Business, regional and national transit professionals and workforce development practitioners were brought together to develop this action plan that highlights Opportunities, Solutions, Potential Partners, and Actions under four themes: Pathways, Pipeline, Perception, and Process. "A Path Forward" can support the transit industry and workforce as it adjusts and recovers from the pandemic and other future challenges.

Additional Sources

Building a Career Pathway System: Promising Practices in Community College - Centered Workforce Development, Workforce Strategy Center

Building the Talent Pipeline: An Implementation Guide, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2015.

Changing Perceptions Not as Easy as You Think, U.S. Industry Today, October 2, 2016 (accessed August 11, 2020)

Engaging, Recognizing, and Developing the MTA Workforce, Prepared by the Blue-Ribbon Panel on Workforce Development, November 2007

How to Attract Millennials to the Transit Industry, METRO Magazine, October 24, 2017, Tom Goodyer and Stephen Kuhr

Major Workforce Issues Confronting New York City Transit, City University of New York (CUNY), May 2017

Managing Transit Workforce in the New Millennium, TCRP Report 277, Federal Transit Administration, Transportation Research Board, 2002

The Transportation Workforce Challenge: Recruiting, Training, and Retaining Qualified Workers for Transportation and Transit Agencies, Transportation Research Board (TRB), 2003

Workforce Development and Succession Planning to Prepare the Rural Transit Industry for the Future. Del Peterson and Ted Rieck, North Dakota State University, Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute: Small Urban and Rural Transit Center, July 2016

Where are the Future Transit Maintenance Technicians Coming From? Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR), 2001

Workforce Development: Public Transportation's Blueprint for the 21st Century, American Public Transportation Association (APTA), 2001

Working Together: A Systems Approach for Transit Training, Transportation Learning Center, Maryland (accessed December 2020)