



A bold voice for transportation workers

PRIORITIES FOR FRONTLINE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Approximately 400,000 Americans work in the public transportation sector. Of those, 90 percent serve in frontline occupations that include bus and rail transit operators, station employees, mechanics, and other non-management positions. Yet, federal policy has failed to support the training needs of the frontline transit workforce, risking major workforce shortages and skill gaps in the coming years.

The reality of this problem is staggering. With the median age in many frontline transit jobs approaching 52, a large portion of the blue-collar transit workforce will retire in the next few years. In fact, the equivalent of more than 120 percent of today's transit workforce will have to be hired and/or re-trained in the next 10 years just to meet our existing needs. Furthermore, as technology rapidly evolves (e.g., transitioning fleets to battery electric buses) the transit industry has demonstrated that it simply does not have the tools it needs to recruit, train, and re-train the next generation of technicians and other high-skilled workers. Without an adequate pipeline of new recruits and upskilling opportunities for the existing workers, our transit systems will face serious challenges providing service.

On average, transit agencies spend just .66 to .88 percent of total payroll on training compared to the average of 4 to 5 percent in many parts of the private sector. This lack of investment in human capital is driven in part by a lack of funding. Virtually no reliable funding is set aside for frontline transit workforce development and training. USDOT oversees several workforce development funding programs – however all of these have a strong focus on university programs and university transportation centers. While these limited funds can be helpful, the largest workforce skills gaps are among the blue-collar technicians, electricians, and signal operators – professions that do not receive training at 4-year universities. Currently, 80 percent of the Federal Transit Administration's limited workforce funding goes to white-collar roles. The recipient of a significant portion of those funds, the National Transit Institute, by its own admission, focuses on training the transit workforce in management and front office roles.

To meet the training needs for the remaining 90 percent of the transit workforce, Congress should provide funding for a similar training center that is focused on the frontline workforce and effective labor-management partnerships for training and safety. The GAO [recognized the need for such](#) an organization in its recent industry needs analysis. Activities carried out by this center may include:

- **Implement GAO recommendation on industry needs analysis.** GAO reviewed FTA's workforce development efforts and concluded that FTA lacks a clear plan to support workforce development in its capital budget. As a first step, GAO recommended that FTA work with a nonprofit partner to identify the transit workforce data needed to help FTA understand future workforce conditions and to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of

collecting the identified data. This, along with the actual analysis of frontline workforce needs in the short and long term would be a high priority for use of funds to a frontline workforce entity.

- **Model curriculum and training development for electric buses.** The entire transit industry faces an immediate challenge as Battery Electric Buses (BEBs) are being adopted faster than anticipated. A significant body of research has demonstrated that a skills gap exists among bus mechanics when it comes to maintaining electric and electronic (E/E) systems. Traditional buses already rely on complex electronic systems. Large agencies address this issue through extreme specialization of their workforce; however smaller agencies struggle to get by. With BEBs becoming a larger component of bus fleets, training for the maintenance of BEBs is becoming an urgent need not only for electric propulsion systems but also to the underlying E/E skills. Developing a solid curriculum for BEB and foundational E/E training for transit agencies to implement would be a critical function of the frontline workforce entity.
- **Training Partnerships.** Currently, there is no national organization developing or supporting deep stakeholder engagement in frontline workforce training. This involves joint labor-management partnerships with national institutions (e.g. the Federal Transit Administration, The Federal Office of Career Technical Education, Transportation Research Board, American Public Transportation Association, Community Transportation Association of America, the National Transit Institute, the Eno Center, and transportation unions) as well as work at the local level. From the examples of the Keystone Transit Training Partnership in Pennsylvania, the Joint Workforce Initiative at Valley Transit in San Jose, CA, and the statewide training partnerships in Utah, it is clear that these partnerships improve frontline training and result in better transit operations in terms of improved efficiency, safety, and customer satisfaction. Full scale, registered apprenticeships can be a major outcome of these partnerships. Sometimes local partners want smaller steps in improving the training they have now. For example, in Utah and in Pennsylvania, strong partnerships at the largest state agency supported development of improved training at small urban and rural agencies. That model can be expanded in other states.
- **Train the Trainer.** Quite often, transit trainers move up from becoming mechanics or operators without learning how to train others. Funding for a frontline workforce entity would support “train the trainer” classes to give on-the-job instructors or would-be trainers hands-on skills for facilitating adult learning. Creating a Transit Cooperative Research Program study, this frontline workforce entity could develop subsequent training for trainers leading to a certification program or other recognized designation.
- **Upgrading and sharing of training resources.** A consistent theme in studies of frontline workforce training needs is the lack of sharing opportunities between transit agencies. Good work is going on at the national and regional level, as well as in many localities, but these practices spread very slowly even to municipalities that are looking for new ideas. A well-developed clearinghouse for training resource sharing could help address that issue. Trainers would also interact with each other, exchanging best practices

and ideas, through an online portal that could further be enhanced by periodic webinars and other conduits.

- **Youth Outreach.** Frontline transit jobs offer rewarding careers with salaries and benefits that can support a middle-class family, whether in a big urban center or in rural areas. Young people are often unaware of frontline transportation jobs as a career option; at the same time, virtually every transit agency is short staffed on frontline workers and unable to fill vacancies. Working with Career Technical Education high schools, a frontline workforce entity could coordinate with transit employers and unions for active outreach to high schools, community colleges, and even introduce career awareness and contextual learning opportunities in middle school. Despite the fact that only about one-third of working adults have a four-year college degree, the default option for most communities remains sending teens to college. Rigorous STEAM training can prepare youth for jobs that are intellectually demanding and do not require college degrees – jobs that provide good wages, benefits, and career pathways with opportunities for advancement. Advanced manufacturing, construction, and technical jobs across every sector all share the challenge of engaging young people while the population of youth who are neither working nor in school grows. This can be a major area of work for a transit frontline workforce entity.
- **Expansion and application of industry-based standards for training.** APTA and transit labor have worked diligently for many years to develop a set of recommended practices for frontline workforce training in occupations like bus mechanic, rail signals maintenance technician, rail car technician, traction power electrician, and transit elevator-escalator mechanic. In a few cases, this work has expanded to include development of classroom-ready instructional material. The continued development and updating of training standards and standards-based courseware for these critical frontline occupations is key to building the successful transit training partnerships and apprenticeships referenced above, as well as in reaching out to CTE educators at the high school or post-secondary level.

We are pleased that some Members of Congress are working to address these training needs and to improve workforce conditions for frontline transit employees. The FY 2020 THUD Appropriations law included \$2.5 million for a national non-profit organization with demonstrated capacity to develop blue-collar training programs through labor-management partnerships and apprenticeships. To build on this success, Rep. Anthony Brown and Senator Chris Van Hollen have recently introduced the National Transit Workforce Training Act (H.R. /S.), which would authorize a national frontline training center similar to one that already exists for management-level employees. By passing the National Transit Workforce Act and focusing on the needs on the frontline workforce, Congress will be taking real steps to grow public transportation across the country, provide pathways to opportunity for working people, and ensure that the changing demands of the workplace are met with real solutions.

Policy Statement No. W20-06
Adopted March 9, 2020