



First Quarter 2023 Edition

eNEWSLETTER

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The Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) was initiated in 1986 by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to provide resources, training and technical assistance to rural transit providers. The Missouri RTAP Center is located at Missouri University of Science and Technology (Missouri S&T) in Rolla. Since April 2012, Missouri S&T has been contracted by MoDOT to manage the RTAP program.

**National
RTAP**
Rural Transit Assistance Program



National RTAP is a program of the Federal Transit Administration dedicated to creating rural transit solutions through technical assistance, partner collaboration and FREE training.

LETTER FROM THE MANAGER



Heath Pickerill
Missouri RTAP Manager

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DEAR TRANSIT FRIENDS,

2023 is shaping up to be a year of change in the RTAP office. Doreen has announced her retirement. While we are excited for her, we are very sad to see her leave. Her last day will be April 28, so we are in the process of hiring her replacement, which will not be easy. She has been a part of the program since we took over managing it in 2012 and a key part of our success in providing training and services to the rural transit agencies throughout the State. From scheduling training and processing Scholarship Reimbursement requests and payments to answering questions, she has provided unequalled customer service. I know she will be greatly missed not only by the RTAP team but by all the agencies we serve. I encourage you to drop her a note of congratulations and thanks for her outstanding service to Missouri's rural transit system.

In other office news, I'm pleased to welcome back Nicole Annis. Nicole was a member of the RTAP and LTAP team for seven years while completing a master's degree and then PhD at Missouri S&T. She taught at Lawrence Technical University for three years and then five years in consulting, as a design engineer as well as a project manager. She has firsthand experience and insight into the training and services RTAP provides as well as a diverse background in curriculum development, program administration, and various other areas related to her new role here. She will be assisting with the development of an online data repository for rural transit agencies, a project we are coordinating with MoDOT staff to develop. She will also be finalizing the implementation of a new learning management system (LMS) with an integrated website for RTAP and LTAP. The LMS and new website should be online within a few months.

I am planning to travel this summer around the state to visit the agencies we serve and attend related transit meetings. If you have any upcoming events you would like RTAP to participate, please let me know. I am happy to share the latest RTAP offerings or gather your ideas on how we can best serve transit agencies in the state. Please feel free to contact me at pickerillh@mst.edu or by phone at 573-341-7637 with any questions, comments, or suggestion. If you know someone who would like to start receiving the newsletter, they can call our office or go to the Missouri RTAP website at www.mortap.com and sign up.

Best wishes,

Heath Pickerill,
Missouri RTAP Manager



TRANSIT FISCAL CLIFF OR TRANSIT FISCAL DOOM?

When ridership plummeted at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, transit agencies across the country experienced substantial operating budget deficits. The federal government responded by rolling out multiple relief packages to help agencies make it through the worst of the pandemic. Now, in early 2023, funds are running out. We surveyed transit agencies nationwide to see where they stand as federal support dwindles.

WHAT IS THE TRANSIT FISCAL CLIFF?

According to the American Public Transportation Association, in the five years leading up to the pandemic, ridership was slowly declining across a range of transit agencies. Even with relatively stable ridership, transit agencies were already struggling to make ends meet.

When the Covid-19 pandemic caused national lockdowns, ridership plummeted, causing revenues from fare collection to drop to almost zero. Without fare revenues, transit agencies no longer had the funding to cover their operating costs. And the federal government stepped in, rolling out three separate emergency relief packages, and incorporating increased support for transit agencies in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). ([Learn more about what the IIJA could accomplish for transit here.](#))

However, this funding alone was not enough. Ridership still hasn't returned to pre-pandemic levels, and workforce

shortages have only applied additional stress. Some local and state leaders also misinterpreted the new influx of federal cash as an opportunity to cut back on their own spending on transit, further delaying the recovery.

These combined stressors have created the transit fiscal cliff: the operating budget deficit expected at transit agencies across the country once their federal relief runs out. And for many transit agencies, the cliff is coming very soon—in some cases, as early as next year.

HOW BAD IS IT?

The National Campaign for Transit Justice (NCTJ) and T4America conducted a sample survey to paint a picture of the fiscal health of transit agencies around the United States as they approach the two-year anniversary of the last emergency relief package. In an effort to hear from a representative sample, we contacted about 40 transit agencies across the country, operationally diverse in size, around the country.

Out of the agencies we contacted, we received 27 responses. Here's what we found:

Urban ridership recovery lags behind rural ridership.

We started our analysis by separating agencies into groups based on geographic area. 5 survey participants serve rural populations, 19 participants serve urban populations, and 4 participants serve both rural and urban populations.

While there is a broad range, the majority of urban transit agencies report recovery levels lower than 75 percent of pre-pandemic levels. Rural agencies reported a range of ridership recovery as low as 60 percent and as high as 90 percent. Meanwhile, jurisdictions that serve both rural and urban populations hovered near the top, reporting ridership around 80 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

Increased workplace choice might explain the slow ridership recovery in urban areas. Workers who have greater workplace choice could have the option to work remotely and no longer rely on public transit to commute. We also found that urban riders are experiencing less reliable service due to workforce shortages. Service reliability is imperative to workers dependent on public transportation, and a lack of reliability could push riders to other travel options.

Most agencies are experiencing workforce shortages.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, workforce shortages have been a major issue across sectors, including public transportation. We knew that the agencies participating in our study might be experiencing shortages, but we were unprepared for the prevalence of workforce issues.

Of our 27 participants, 24 continue to experience workforce shortages, starting when the pandemic began. Some agencies are short over 800 operators and maintenance workers who are vital for the day-to-day operation of transit agencies. As a result of the limited personnel, some agencies have had no choice but to cut service.

To address these shortages, agencies are working to incentivize workers to join their team. [See this blog post for more information on their efforts.](#)

Two-thirds of transit agencies predict budget deficits by 2025.

We separated participants into three groups based on their timelines for expected operating budgets. An overwhelming majority of transit agencies expect budget deficits with start dates rapidly approaching. Transit agencies began running out of funds as early as Fiscal Year 2022, and only 5 of our 27 participants didn't project an operating budget deficit.

10 out of 27 projected deficits starting in Fiscal Year 2024, and an additional 10 projected deficits starting in Fiscal Year 2025. Only 3 transit agencies projected operating budget deficits starting in the Fiscal Year 2026 or later and expected funds to last long term without intervention.

Transit agencies are implementing unique tactics to address budget shortfalls.

Participants varied in how they plan to address their deficits. Seven participants plan to increase fare prices, five plan to cut services, three are discussing ballot measures to increase funding, and the remaining are looking at solutions unique to their situations. One agency is looking to change service hours to reflect new traffic patterns. Another is looking to create a coalition of local businesses and institutions to philanthropically support the transit system, which would help replace missing fares.

It's clear that transit agencies know the fiscal cliff is coming, and they're not turning a blind eye. To continue delivering the service communities need, these agencies are offering creative solutions, showing a steadfast commitment to the operation of public transportation.

HELP TRANSIT SUCCEED

The Stronger Communities Through Better Transit Act (H.R. 3744), sponsored by Congressman Hank Johnson of Georgia, would allocate \$20 billion annually to transit agencies' operating budgets for four years, starting in FY23. The additional federal funding would empower agencies to make significant improvements to transit service. This could mean providing additional service or developing services for underserved communities. You can show your support for this legislation by calling your congressional representatives.

In addition to calling for federal funding, you can contact your state legislators and tell them to support similar legislation at the state level. In some states, that may mean advocating for constitutional and statutory changes that would allow the state to provide funding support for transit and alternative modes of transportation.

Another way to advocate for transit is by getting involved with your local government meetings. Providing feedback for members of local government is an integral step in improving transit service.

For too long, transit agencies have struggled to provide necessary service to our communities. So that all Americans are able to take advantage of this valuable resource, transit agencies must be given the support they need to deliver quality, reliable service.

t4america.org/2023/01/31/transit-fiscal-cliff-or-transit-fiscal-doom/



THREE GENERATIONS OF TRANSIT DRIVERS FROM OREGON

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A WOMAN TRANSIT OPERATOR

Across the U.S., transit agencies are grappling with a shortfall of operators. These operators — frontline workers that keep buses and trains running are essential to a functioning transit network that actually gets riders where they need to go.

But being an operator is no simple feat. There are long hours, and often for more junior employees, irregular shifts, and shifts at very early hours. There are long routes, sometimes without well scheduled breaks or access to restrooms. And there is the stress of day to day interactions with riders, sometimes involving altercations between passengers, or disagreements over fare payment. A recent piece in the Washington Post chronicles the harrowing experiences of one woman bus driver in Denver. In New York City, bus driver harassment accounts for nearly 75 percent of all transit worker attacks.

As cities continue to deal with economic and health crises, transit often becomes a go-to transitional space for those facing homelessness, or experiencing mental health episodes. Drivers, many of whom are ill equipped to face these challenges on their own, can find themselves in challenging, uncomfortable and sometimes unsafe situations.

Many of the challenges of being a frontline operator seem to become more acute for women.

There is, of course, the fact that women already comprise such a small percentage of the frontline workforce: In 2018, only 20 percent of operators at SFMTA were women, at the time short of the national average of 37 percent. At the MBTA just 30 percent of operators are women, at VTA

just 16 percent of operators are women, at TTC also 16 percent, and at SEPTA in 2020 women account for just about 20 percent of the positions in management.

In addition to often being one of few or the only females in the depot, women operators must navigate the challenges of a system that is most often white-male led. Women make up just 15 percent of the transit workforce overall, and even with intentional efforts to hire more women (in leadership and as frontline staff in particular), many agencies still fall short. Women in operations roles confront pay gaps, even with unions. At MBTA, for example, women earn 89 cents for every dollar that men earn.

Despite the myriad of challenges that operators face, many still put on their uniforms everyday and do the work of keeping their cities moving. These are just a few of the women on the front lines, many trailblazers in their roles, who are laying the groundwork for building more fair and inclusive workplaces. These women share with us a bit about the challenges they face as operators, but they also share what it is that keeps them in the work. - *Ashley Pryce and Stephanie Lotshaw*

TONYA ABERNATHY
Bus Operator, King County Metro, Seattle, Wash.

I love driving the bus, I'm an outgoing person, I love the communication I get with the passengers. The rewarding part is when the passengers appreciate what we do. When passengers come up to me and say, thank you for your service — it makes me feel like I'm in the military! Some passengers thank us daily; one man gave us a gift card to buy coffee at Café Fiore. I appreciate that.

It can also be difficult. You have maybe 2000 or more passengers in a day, but there might be one passenger that has negative energy which you have to take the negative and turn it into positive. Taking care of yourself and your mental health is important. As a female it's harder, because some passengers treat you differently because you're a woman — they see what they can get away with. Or they think they can use unwanted advances towards you. They wouldn't treat male operators like that. In addition to being an operator, I am also a Chief Shop Steward, and a leader at the base. I try to educate other operators, and tell them: When we go outside, is your shadow different than my shadow? I use that all the time when I talk to people. We shouldn't treat anybody differently.

The other challenging part — we must deal with passengers who are mentally ill. If you turn around and give mentally ill passengers eye contact, they will respond in a positive manner. I wish we could have more training for that. I was a security officer before, so I know how to deal with the public. I also wish we could get training with role playing to help operators with assaults. I want all operators to self-care which is making sure they get proper sleep, exercise and eat right. I've been practicing self-care. I also get a Himalayan salt stones massage to help me with my self-care.

I'm a proud King County Metro Transit Operator and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587 member. As a female, I honor the uniform, I love my job.

ORQUIDIA FLORES

Bus Operator, Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago, IL

It's amazing how serious customers look when they're approaching the bus, but then when I open the door and get a smile, it's like, "Wow, that's great. Have a good day." That's what I look forward to every time I go to work. It feels like I'm giving my family member a ride to work. What motivates me is making that ride memorable. I'm not just a driver. I'm not a robot. I'm here to get you there safely and give you a great experience. I've had so many different passengers tell me, "You're the first person that's asked me how my day is going."

A lot of people think traffic [is the most challenging part of the job], but that's the least of our worries. It's what's happening inside the bus. [We have to] multitask to keep everybody safe. Sometimes we have passengers that are just not having a good day. And that's okay, we're all human. But as the driver, I have to feel out the situation and de-escalate if it's getting borderline trouble. I start with, "Hey, you doing okay back there? Let's just have a

little quick chat." And then, "Hey, are we all right?" And then they tell me what's going on, and then that's it. They grab a seat and I drop them off. Sometimes all we need is to hear them out.

And while I'm doing that, I have to make sure everyone around is comfortable, to let them know without words, "Hey, it's okay. I got this. Don't worry. You're in good hands."

My advice for this job is to be yourself and treat others the way you would want to be treated. This is a great job. You're going to get taken care of when you enter this job. So, take care of others. Give them that great ride. Give them that smile of yours. When I come home so tired, my kids are like, "You're always doing too much." But I don't do it because, "Oh, I'm trying to get so tired today." I tell my family: "It's tiring, but rewarding."

And for my passengers, that's what they value. They're like, "Oh my God, you're so kind." I just hope that by me doing this, that person can get out of my bus and be kind too when they get to work. I wanted to work for CTA because I love my city. I'm just so proud to be driving that bus. It's like I'm the face of the company. With my career here, I hope that I can motivate others to be who you are when you're at work. I want to help CTA be recognized more for our drivers, women, whoever you are. And maybe one day, be somebody important at CTA, not just the driver that everybody sees.

THEJOAL HOPE

Bus Operator, Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago, IL

Being a female Bus Operator has its rewards and its pitfalls.

You have customers who appreciate you coming to work. They will say, "Oh, thank you so much for coming to work because, man, I needed to get to work, and I'm so glad that you're here. I can get to work on time." So that motivates you for the day. You may be thinking, "Oh, I'm so tired. I just don't feel like being here." But once you get that one customer who voices appreciation, that'll wake you right on up.

Some people don't talk to you respectfully. Especially being a woman, you get a lot of disrespect, and you got to learn how to deal with that ... You got to learn to hold your tongue because all ignorance does not deserve a response. So for me, over the years, I've just become very prayerful. It's not easy working with the public being a bus operator because you have to wear too many hats and still be aware of your surroundings. Let me not forget the long hours doesn't help, they can be draining so getting plenty

of rest isn't an option. But once you get your niche, it gets easier.

If you have managers that are observant, spiritual and motivators it helps. Having an open-door policy is much-needed in a business like this. Some managers are good about that — you can talk to them and let them know where you stand for that day. They say on paper that “customers are always right,” but in reality, that's not always the case. So you need managers to be more understanding, good listeners and open to giving suggestions that are not printed in the book.

This past year has been really rough for me, but I had a manager, G.M. Akindele, who was very supportive and understanding of what I was going through at that time. It's imperative to have good people in positions that not only make sure you're doing the right thing but also be supportive, motivating and encouraging. Ones who you can talk to, who can see when there's something wrong and say, “Hey, what's going on? How can we fix this? Do you need some time off?”

The rewards and benefits have been amazing for me, being a single mom. There's some good to it all. You get to take care of your children with providing more than just the basics. Opportunities to advance within the company are of great magnitude.

I've met a lot of good people over the years working here at CTA. Managers, supervisors, instructors etc., some of whom were operators with me. Some people have met their husbands and wives here, even if that's not what they came here for. You want to be in an environment where everyone is respectful, communicative and compassionate towards one another because this is your family for most of the day.

My advice for a new female bus operator would be to have a great support system, stay strong and prayerful.

ALICIA MICHELLE SMITH
Customer Service Representative, 32 years at the Chicago Transit Authority

My original title was Combined Rail Operator. We were cross-trained as a ticket agent, operator, conductor, tower or switching, and flagging.

Then I became a Customer Service Representative. You don't have enough time for me to tell you all that I actually do. CTA has a safety-first model, so the safety of the passengers takes precedence over everything. While I'm interfacing with passengers in the station, I carry a radio, and I'm monitoring the entire time. If things are chaotic, I assist where I'm needed.

I might be on the trains assisting the operator, I might be on the platform, so it varies from day to day. Also, I work with instruction, and I train new hires. I'm a line instructor.

The people are the reward. I absolutely love my passengers. When people come to Chicago, and they want to go to a Cubs game, or they want to go to the Blues Festival or the Taste of Chicago, I really enjoy helping them. We meet people from all over the world. The other reward is the men and women that go to work every day that don't give up in our current political climate.

There are several challenging things, especially right now. The violence gets in our way of doing our job. There [used to be] a lot of respect for us as transit workers. The boldness that we see right now has never been a part of our world.

And homelessness, I've never seen it this bad before. When you look at our history of how we, CTA, resolve issues to get you to your destination, it's never been a problem— we're trained to resolve an issue in 10 minutes. But when we have these real hard problems, like homelessness or fighting, and our train's not moving, that's hard. Each generation has its own challenges, and new hires have challenges that we did not have.

My advice to them is you're more than capable and give 100 percent without harming yourself. I like that management is now making a commitment to new hires that if you stay with CTA full-time, we will give you full-time benefits. Men and women need to take care of their families. And you have to love the passengers. Our job is all about transporting people. Whether you're operating a train, driving a bus, or you're in the station, everybody is dependent on you to lead them to safety. It's a responsibility that I would say — take seriously. I've always worked those busy stations. And I knew that my responsibility was to be the face of CTA, and to get the passengers to their destination because that's what we do.

When I started working for CTA, I became a fan of the Cubs fans because they were die-hards. When the Cubs won the World Series, I was happier for the fans than I was for the Cubs. In my 20-something-odd years transporting the fans to games, I saw they carried every generation with them to that game. So, the sweet spot for me has been transporting Chicagoans to events that bring us together, and I love the pride that we carry for our city. As an agency, CTA, is in the middle of that. That is what we do — transport people. If we stop, the city stops.

usa.streetsblog.org/2023/01/26/what-its-like-to-be-a-woman-transit-operator/

NEW COURSES AVAILABLE

NEW COURSES

JOHN RICE, MO-RTAP INSTRUCTOR, COMPLETED TWO NTI TRAIN-THE-TRAINER COURSES IN DECEMBER 2022 AND CAN PROVIDE INSTRUCTION AT YOUR NEXT TRAINING. IF YOU WOULD LIKE JOHN TO INSTRUCT THESE CLASSES AT YOUR NEXT SCHEDULED TRAINING DATE, PLEASE CONTACT DOREEN HARKINS, MO-RTAP PROGRAM SPECIALIST, AT (573) 341-6155 OR HARKINS@MST.EDU

LISTED BELOW ARE THE NEW COURSES:

Assault Awareness and Prevention for Transit Operators

This training provides transit bus operators the knowledge and skills needed to reduce the likelihood of assault incidents during revenue service. Prevention methods covered include defining assault, discussing the types of incidents that could be considered assault, and recognizing key vulnerability factors. Prevention strategies

focus on communication and response skills, and the value of reporting incidents. The importance of seeking assistance to recover from assault incidents will also be discussed.

Approximate time: 1.5 hours

Violence in the Transit Workforce – Prevention, Response and Recovery

This training focuses on three areas: preventing, responding to, and recovering from workplace violence. Prevention methods include implementing system and personal security measures, recognizing and reporting the warning signs of potentially violent behavior, and using effective interpersonal skills for dealing with different, difficult and dangerous people. Response strategies focus on self-preservation and accurate reporting while recovery steps address the stress associated with workplace violence and what to do to address its impact.

Approximate time: 1.5 hours



The creative insight and creative genius of a Phelps County couple, took this amazing late 19th Century hay barn and transformed it from a functional farm building into a cleverly designed office and retail space for their growing business. The inspired couple went to great lengths to retain the architectural heritage and footprint of the old barn, as they molded and shaped it into the unique and well preserved space it is today.

In 2022, as SMTS, Inc. was searching for a new home for their Phelps County Transit Operation, which was growing and expanding, as a Deviated Fixed Route Service was being added, the building's owners were making a decision to sell. With the help of local Realtors, Jared and Danielle Jordan of "Home Sweet MO," along with MoDOT's Multi-Model Division and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), SMTS entered into an agreement to purchase, utilizing local funds.

Closing on the property in January of 2023, and making a few minor changes to accommodate SMTS' business needs and establishing a larger parking area in front of the building has made it the perfect "Bus Barn" and Operational Headquarters for SMTS' Phelps County Transit Service.

SMTS is the Nation's Second Largest "Rural" Transit Provider in the Nation, second only to OATS Transit, which is also a Missouri based Transit Authority. An official Open House was held on March 9th to celebrate and commemorate SMTS's new home.

Thank you!

Realtors, Home Sweet MO
MoDOT's Multi-Model Division
Federal Transit Administration (FTA)

Open House...



**Denny Ward,
Executive Director**



Daniel Smith, Fleet & Facility Manager. Denny Ward, Ex. Director. Ginny Smith, Dir. of Operations. Tracy Jones, Dir. of Finance. Tori Wieneke, H.R. Assistant.



Daniel Smith, Fleet & Facility manager in the new training area.



**Wendy Cline, Phelps Co. Coordinator.
Lola Olusanya, Rider. Teresa DuShurley,
Crawford Co. Coordinator.**



The Barn



Lola Olusanya, Rider. Eddy Lewis, Driver



GETTING AROUND RURAL AMERICA WITHOUT A CAR IS HARD. THESE COMMUNITIES DEVELOPED SOLUTIONS

Rural America is not known for its public transportation. But as its residents get older faster than their urban counterparts, the need is increasing. Some communities are finding ways to provide rides.

Joel Tyndall lives off a gravel road in northeast Nebraska, miles away from the nearest town. As a double amputee, his car has been collecting dust in his garage.

Some have suggested he could move closer to the biggest town in the area, Norfolk, where he has three dialysis appointments a week to manage his diabetes.

But it hasn't come to that — thanks in part to the Cedar County Transit — which works a little like a rural Uber; anyone can call to schedule a ride.

"I'm gonna leave my home?" Tyndall asked. "No, as long as this transit continues to run I'll be using it for just about everything. These guys help me out more than you would believe."

In rural areas, residents can be miles away from essentials like doctors and grocery stores instead of minutes. Without transportation, people who don't have a car or can't drive often have to move closer to services.

More than a third of state rural health offices reported lack of transit was the biggest barrier to elderly people staying in their homes, according to research from Carrie

Henning-Smith, who studies rural health at the University of Minnesota.

Rural America tends to be sicker, poorer and older than its urban counterparts. Henning-Smith said the negative-but-true statistics make it even more important for rural residents to be able to access transit.

"There's greater need for transportation among older adults in rural communities, but more transportation challenges in getting people where they need to go," she said. "And that will only increase as the years go on, and the population continues to age in rural places."

Providers like Cedar County Transit help fill in the gap. The northeast Nebraska county has had some level of public transportation since about 1980, although it's come a long way since then, according to manager Nikki Pinkelman.

They now have 15 vans, 15 drivers and a full-time scheduler. The operation recently launched services into a bordering county and moved into its own building.

Pinkelman said the community has embraced the expanded service.

"You used to rely on your neighbor, or maybe you relied on your wife or your kids. But most families now, both parents are working," she said. "Or maybe your kids don't live close, and you don't have someone to take you."

Anyone living in Cedar County and parts of Knox County can schedule a ride, as long as it's within 200 miles and on a weekday from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The service runs on money from the state and federal government, grants and contracts and local community funding, as well as fare for rides. In fiscal year 2021, that came to a total of nearly \$382,000 with nearly \$234,000 in federal funds; close to \$61,000 from the state; about \$59,000 in local funding and almost \$28,000 in rider fees.

Fees are based on round trip mileage and range from \$3 for an in-town destination to \$75 for a 400-mile trip. Pinkelman said she's conscious that some riders may be on fixed incomes and tries to keep costs as low as possible. The service can also bill Medicaid for recipients who use transit to get to health appointments.

Cedar County Transit has loadable fare cards that can also be given as gifts. That was Rita Meirose's Christmas present this year from her kids. Now she books rides with the bus multiple times a week to grab groceries, pick up her prescriptions, get to hair appointments and play cards with friends.

She doesn't like driving during the winter and says using the transit service is easier.

"We have a lot of elderly here, people like myself, and a lot of them just can't drive anymore," Meirose said. "I can drive; I still have a whole year on my license. I'm not afraid of driving, but I don't like to drive on ice."

Providing public transit in rural areas is a difficult task, but a patchwork of services serves towns and counties throughout the Midwest and Great Plains.

Kansas was tied in 2019 for the most rural transit agencies in the nation, and in Iowa 35 providers serve riders across the state's 99 counties. In 2020, Oklahoma developed a transit plan to help it become a "top 10 state in transit" by 2040.

Missouri's "Operating Above the Standard" Transit, or OATS, is the largest agency in the country and operates in 87 counties. But it doesn't reach every corner of the state.

Sandra Morris realized transportation was a big barrier to rural health when she began working at the Ozarks Medical Center in West Plains, Missouri, where OATS does not have service.

The poverty, the rough terrain and the lack of nearby friends and family made it hard for people to keep their appointments. That's especially true for people seeking help from the behavioral health center.

"Those patients have, for the most part, burned their bridges. So there's no one to bring them in," Morris said.

"You can throw all the money at mental health you want, but until you provide a way for patients to get here and have return appointments, you're setting them up for failure."

The Missouri Rural Health Association administers HealthTran, which began in 2014 as a pilot program to get people to their medical appointments. Nearly 10 years later, it's still in place and has expanded to cover more of the state and include rides to places like grocery stores, pharmacies and libraries.

Morris leads education and training at HealthTran and said rural transportation does not come easy or cheap.

"But how expensive is it if you don't provide it? What is the cost to your community?" she asked. "What is the cost to the citizens you're there to serve? It will pay its way, the services provided will pay its way."

The National Transit Database reports 82% of counties nationwide had some level of rural transit available in 2019. Henning-Smith is quick to point out that still means 18% of counties don't have a public option.

She said that may isolate people who usually have a deep knowledge about their hometown and often provide the intimacy and connection small towns are known for.

"In an era when some rural communities are losing population, it's really important to think about ways to make sure that everyone has a chance to feel socially connected, socially cohesive, active and engaged and vibrant," Henning-Smith said.

Cherry County in western Nebraska was one of those counties. It's the state's biggest county, with a footprint larger than Connecticut. But for years, Cherry County had no public transit.

Assisted living facilities and a nursing home used to provide shuttle service to its residents in Valentine – Cherry County's biggest town – but the owners shut down shop in 2021.

Peg Snell said she reached a breaking point after noticing elderly residents walking to the hospital in the heat, a few blocks away from Prairie Estates, the independent living center she manages.

Something had to change, and she quickly became an advocate for bringing transit to Valentine. Snell pushed city officials to ask Open Plains Transit, an agency covering the Nebraska panhandle, to expand their services into the town.

"It's like, why wouldn't we do this? It's going to be a cost, but it's going to keep our elderly in our community," she

said. "We could have a great system because right now we have nothing."

Jonnie Kusek is director of transportation at Open Plains and said she knew the agency had to help when she got the call from Valentine. To Kusek, accessible transportation can change lives.

"It's really important that we give people opportunities to go out and live in their communities," she said. "Transit should revolve around what people's needs and their lives are. People's lives shouldn't revolve around when transit is available."

Representatives from Cherry County, a senior living center, the hospital, tourism, health and human services and residents packed a town hall and showed Kusek there was real interest and need in Valentine.

The bulk of funding for the service comes from state and local government, with certain costs requiring a local match of up to 25%. The project also received commitments from the Pestel Charitable Foundation in Valentine and the Cherry County Hospital.

In November, big white buses started appearing on Valentine's streets.

Nearly half of the rides so far have been for medical appointments. Kyle Kellum leads Cherry County Hospital and said it's helped the hospital's bottom-line by reducing missed appointments, and he hopes it can improve the health of the entire community.

"If we can get folks in and do the preventative stuff, it really keeps folks out of the ER and keeps them healthier long term," Kellum said. "But sometimes getting here is tough."

Lorin Beel lives at Prairie Estates and said he put off a colonoscopy last fall because he didn't have a way to get back to Valentine from the Veterans Affairs Medical Center

in Fort Meade, South Dakota.

"I couldn't find nobody to go with me. I have no family really to speak of, and I'm single," Beel said. "Now I can say 'I'll get the heck out of your hair, just get that old bus up here and away I'll go.'"

For some residents it's meant the difference between staying or leaving their homes.

Jim Ducey teared up as he talked about what a tough winter it's been. If not for the bus, he's not sure he could have remained in the community.

"I did not want to leave Valentine," Ducey said. "I'm still here and that is because the transit service arrived at the perfect time."

Right now the service is only available within Valentine city limits, leaving the rest of Cherry County's 6,000-square miles without a public transportation option.

But Snell said she hopes it's only the beginning. There's been interest from Cherry County commissioners on expanding the service area.

"This is such a great thing for this community," Snell said. "But there's a lot of people outside of Valentine. And I just hope we can keep it going, and it can continue to grow the way it has so far."

This story was produced in partnership with Harvest Public Media, a collaboration of public media newsrooms in the Midwest. It reports on food systems, agriculture and rural issues. Follow Harvest on Twitter: @HarvestPM.

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kcur.org/2023-02-24/rural-transit





FIVE TRANSIT TOPICS TO WATCH IN 2023

The public transit industry begins the new year with a mix of challenges and opportunities. Since experiencing a transformation brought on by the pandemic in 2020, the industry has embraced the requirement to be flexible.

Here are the five topics the Mass Transit editorial team will be watching closely in 2023; some are familiar, some have increased in prominence in the past year, but all have the potential to either threaten or enhance the industry's hard-fought adaptability.

Pursuing lower emission goals

This topic has remained on our list as it continues to generate stories from various angles throughout the year. There is a significant federal funding opportunity to pursue low- and zero-emission fleets and, despite the collective move of the industry toward a lower-emission future, there remains a fair amount of confusion and frustration surrounding how to pursue these goals.

Lowering emissions is a shared federal priority of both Canada and the U.S., with leaders from both countries signing the Global Memorandum of Understanding on Zero-Emission Medium-and Heavy-

Duty Vehicles at COP27 in November 2022.

The international agreement supports a path to 100 percent new zero-emission medium- and heavy-duty vehicle sales by 2040, with a targeted floor of 30 percent new zero-emission sales in these sectors by 2030.

In the U.S., the recently signed Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 legislation included \$90 million for the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Buses and Bus Facilities Grants and \$50 million for FTA's Low or No Emission Grants.

In addition, approximately 20 percent of the funding designated under community project funding/ congressionally directed spending through the Transit Infrastructure Grants account will go toward projects that involve low- or zero-emission vehicles and/or supporting infrastructure of these vehicles.

Continued inflationary and supply chain pressure

There is a collective want – not only in the industry, but everywhere – to see quickly rising prices and shortages of raw materials, parts another supply chain issues fade in the rear view.

Last month, NFI Group President and CEO Paul Soubry spoke at an event and noted the extreme challenges faced. He explained things had eased somewhat, but at the peak of the crisis, NFI had nearly 500 vehicles that were built but offline, which represented US\$250 million in cash.

Gary A. Smith, CPIM-F, CSCP-F, CLTD-F, told Mass Transit for its December/January cover story that in the long term, supply chains need to evolve.

Smith offered the formula he believes will help the industry: “Adaptability equals agility plus resilience, where resilience, is the ability to absorb a change quickly, and agility is the ability to pivot and come up with a new way of doing something.”

The term “recession” is cropping up more in conversations, and the Mass Transit editorial team will be watching to see and report on how the industry powers through yet another year of challenges.

The frustration and innovation of modern recruiting

Another ongoing challenge to impact the industry has been how to retain and recruit new employees, specifically, operators and maintenance personnel.

Indeed and Glassdoor’s Hiring and Workplace Trends Report 2023 notes five long-term trends that will be particularly relevant to 2023 including:

1. The job market will continue to be tight.
2. Remote work will continue; not great news for those in the industry banking on the return of peak services, but the silver lining there may be a silver lining in the third trend.
3. Workers seek higher pay and benefits are helping employers stand out; the survey found there has been an increase in commuter benefits (including transit reimbursement), and the increase in access is within markets such as arts and entertainment, food service and retail.
4. Happiness and well-being matter.
5. Diversity, equity and inclusion is being thrust to the forefront with the changing workforce.

The transit industry continues to face fierce competition for talent and is developing new approaches toward recruitment and retention that include increasing starting salaries, enhanced training opportunities, new benefits, a re-examination of current hiring practices and new educational and

private sector partners to meet the hiring needs of the industry.

Bridging the gap between perception and reality in rider experience

Without customers, there would be no transit systems. Regular surveys of riders and non-riders help gauge what and where gaps could be regarding service, frequency and other important elements, such as safety.

Agencies have embraced new technologies to make trip planning more seamless, implemented streamlined fare policies and upgraded facilities to ensure riders of all abilities have full access. On the safety front, there have been efforts to increase transit representative presence either in the form of police officers, transit security personnel or ambassador program representatives.

As detailed in an article from September 2022, increasing ridership and improving morale will take diverse strategies in customer experience programs.

Microtransit will continue to grow

Municipalities such as Sedona and Chandler, Ariz., Birmingham, Ala., and St. Lucie County, Fla., and transit agencies, including Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, Indianapolis Public Transportation Corporation, Wave Transit, C-TRAN, Via Metropolitan Transit, New Orleans Regional Transit Authority and Community Transit are among the transit providers to have launched or expanded on-demand microtransit options in 2022.

In a report published in October 2022, the Mineta Transportation Institute outlined microtransit’s advantages including flexibility, improved customer experience and its ability to bridge a service gap as key factors in its continued popularity. The report argues public transit agencies can better adapt to post-pandemic transit needs with some of the flexibility previously offered by ride-hailing.

The challenge with the continued interest in microtransit will be developing funding models to sustain successful pilot projects.

masstransitmag.com/management/article/21291858/

Upcoming EVENTS



Partnering with



CTAA EXPO 2023

May 21-25, 2023
Oklahoma City Convention Center
100 West Oklahoma City Blvd.
Oklahoma City, OK 73109

CTAA's EXPO is the premier annual training and networking event for community and public transportation professionals. Participants take part in essential learning and networking events. Speakers and sessions will keep attendees up to date with innovative technology, workforce development, communication strategies, funding, and regulations. The EXPO also features a trade show with all of the latest community transportation goods and services.

<https://ctaa.org/expo-2023-home/>

2023 MIDWEST TRANSIT CONFERENCE

September 6-8, 2023

The Westin Kansas City at Crown Center
1 E. Pershing Road
Kansas City, MO 64108



Mark your calendar for the 4-State 2023 Midwest Transit Conference. This two-day conference will provide opportunities to meet with other transit professionals, stakeholders, elected and interested citizens from across the Midwest. Hosted at the Westin Kansas City at Crown Center, this event brings forth a unique opportunity to share innovative ideas and best practices with a variety of top presentations, mobile workshops, vendors and panel discussions from Missouri, Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska.

<https://mopublictransit.org/event/2023-midwest-transit-confer->



5th NATIONAL RTAP CONFERENCE

Navigating the Tides of Change with Rural & Tribal Transit

December 3-6, 2023

Marriott Myrtle Beach Resort & Spa at Grande Dunes
8400 Costa Verde Drive
Myrtle Beach, SC 29572

<https://www.nationalrtap.org/News/Conference/2023-Myrtle-Beach>

AVAILABLE TRAINING PROGRAMS

The following is a list of the training programs and course length of each that are currently available to rural transit providers through Missouri RTAP. Requests for training can be made by contacting Doreen Harkins, MO-RTAP Program Specialist, at harkinsd@mst.edu or 573-341-6155.

1. ACTIVE SHOOTER PREVENTION AND RESPONSE – 2 HOURS.
2. AGGRESSIVE DRIVING – 1 HOUR.
3. ASSAULT AWARENESS AND PREVENTION FOR TRANSIT OPERATORS – 1.5 HOURS
4. BACKING SAFETY – 1 HOUR.
5. BASIC FIRST AID – 1 HOUR.
6. BLOOD BORNE PATHOGENS – 1 HOUR.
7. CPR & BASIC FIRST AID – 4 HOURS.
8. DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PASSENGERS – 2 HOURS.
9. DEFENSIVE DRIVING – 3 HOURS.
10. DISTRACTIVE DRIVING – 1 HOUR.
11. DIVERSITY & AWARENESS TRAINING - PROVIDING QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE FOR TRANSPORTATION PASSENGERS WHO HAVE DISABILITIES – 2 HOURS.
12. DRIVEN TO EXTREMES – 1 HOUR.
13. DRUG & ALCOHOL AWARENESS – 1 HOUR.
14. EMERGENCY & EVACUATION PROCEDURES – 1 1/2 TO 2 HOURS.
15. FATIGUE AWARENESS FOR DRIVERS – 2 HOURS.
16. HIPAA – 1 HOUR.
17. NIGHT DRIVING – 1 HOUR.
18. OPERATION LIFESAVER – HIGHWAY-RAIL CROSSING SAFETY – 1 HOUR.
19. PASSENGER ASSISTANCE/MOBILITY AID SECUREMENT – 2 HOURS.
20. REASONABLE SUSPICION TRAINING FOR SUPERVISORS – 2 HOURS.
21. SAFE & SECURE PROPER INFANT AND CHILD SEAT INSTALLATION – 2 HOURS.
22. SENSITIVITY AWARENESS – 1 HOUR.
23. SEXUAL HARRASSMENT – 1 HOUR.
24. SLIPS, TRIPS AND FALLS – 1 HOUR.
25. VIOLENCE IN THE TRANSIT WORKFORCE – PREVENTION, RESPONSE AND RECOVERY – 1.5 HOURS
26. WHEELCHAIR SECUREMENT – 2 TO 3 HOURS DEPENDING ON NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS.
27. WINTER DRIVING SAFETY – 1 HOUR.

For more information on classes and to register please visit: mltrc.mst.edu/mortaphome/mortaptraining/

RESOURCES

National RTAP – Rural Transit Assistance Program

www.nationalrtap.org/

Transportation Safety Institute – Transit Safety & Security Training Division

www.tsi.dot.gov/Transit.aspx

Federal Transit Administration – Rural Transit Assistance Program Page

www.fta.dot.gov/funding/grants/grants_financing_3554.html

Missouri Public Transit

www.mopublictransit.org/

National Transit Institute

www.ntionline.com/

Kansas RTAP – Kansas University Transportation Center

www.kutc.ku.edu/cgiwrap/kutc/rtap/index.php/index.html

Transportation Research Board's (TRB) Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP)

www.tcrponline.org/

