

DRISI

CALTRANS DIVISION OF RESEARCH,
INNOVATION AND SYSTEM INFORMATION

Research

Notes

Modal

APRIL 2024

Project Title:
Survey: Causes of Transit Operator
Shortages

Task Number: 4093

Start Date: November 1, 2022

Completion Date: May 31, 2024

Task Manager:
Bradley Mizuno
Transportation Engineer (Electrical)
bmizuno@dot.ca.gov

Survey: Causes of Transit Operator Shortages

This research will look at the causes for public transportation staffing shortages to allow a better understanding leading to effectively sustain and improve transit services.

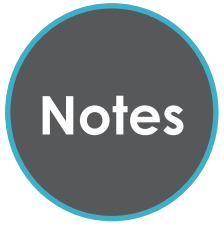
WHAT IS THE NEED?

Public transportation providers throughout the U.S. are experiencing significant challenges hiring and retaining bus and train operators. These challenges have affected agencies for years, but have become substantially more acute during, and in the aftermath of, the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, shortages are preventing numerous California municipal transit agencies from operating their full service schedules, leading to service suspensions, cancellations, and delays that are making it difficult for people throughout the state—including people in urban, suburban, exurban, and rural areas—to get where they need to go.

Municipal transit agencies have taken some short-term actions to address these challenges, including raising frontline employees' wages and benefits, but it is not clear whether these actions alone are addressing all causes of the staffing shortages or will be effective for the long term. Thus, a better understanding of these causes will help transit industry stakeholders in California—such as Caltrans, which administers \$2.5-4 billion of annual transit and rail programs with service goals that are hindered by the shortfall of qualified bus and train operators—more effectively sustain and improve transit services.



DRISI provides solutions and
knowledge that improves
California's transportation system



WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Researchers will conduct a comprehensive statewide survey to document challenges, skills gaps, and barriers that are affecting the California transit industry's ability to recruit and retain qualified professionals who operate municipal transit service – defined for purposes of this project as transit service modes categorized in the National Transit Database as bus, commuter bus, bus rapid transit, trolleybus, heavy rail, light rail, and streetcar rail). Information collected through the survey and analyzed to identify factors underlying the industry's ongoing staff shortages may include (but not be limited to): salaries and benefits, barriers to entry, aging workforces, occupational hazards, required job duties, workplace amenities and protections, and COVID-19 impacts. The researchers will analyze survey results to identify causes of the transit industry's operator shortages and determine potential strategies that can address those shortages.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

Researchers will produce a report, based on findings from the survey described above, that evaluates causes of transit operator shortages and how these causes have evolved during COVID-19. Based on this evaluation, the study will recommend solutions for transit industry officials, stakeholders, and Caltrans to consider. These recommendations for consideration may include a proposal for a pilot Caltrans Division of Rail and Mass Transportation (DRMT)-administered program related to transit workforce development.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

The study findings will help Caltrans incorporate development of the frontline transit workforce into the transit programs it administers, helping optimize return on transit investments. By deploying the findings to transit agencies throughout the state, these providers can address bus and train operator shortages to restore and expand service and narrow the Caltrans-identified \$10.7-billion gap between existing and needed transit service levels for California. Further, the findings will help better align workplace amenities with bus and rail operators' duties, improving work conditions for these employees and addressing known diversity and gender gaps in the industry.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

The research team submitted final drafts of the literature review (deliverable 2b) to the Caltrans team in February 2024. The research team considered feedback from the Caltrans project panel and has conducted further research where possible and/or noted that the feedback raises concerns that will be addressed in interviews with survey respondents.

The research team worked on Deliverable 3a, the survey format was approved by the California State University, Long Beach's Institutional Review Board in February 2024. The Institutional Review Board waived the need for a review process.

The researchers have delivered the following deliverables to Caltrans:

- Task 1: Coordination and quarterly reports
- Task 2: Survey Respondent Target List and Literature Review
- Task 3: Survey Development and Deployment