

Research Results

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.

Modal

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Project Title: Causes of Transit Operator Shortages

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WHAT WAS 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.

WHAT WAS OUR GOAL?

Researchers were tasked to produce a report, based on findings from surveying transit agencies, that evaluates causes of transit operator shortages and how these causes have evolved during COVID-19. Based on this evaluation, the study would recommend solutions for transit industry officials, stakeholders, and Caltrans to consider. These recommendations for consideration may include a proposal for a pilot Caltrans administered program related to transit



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workforce development.

WHAT DID WE DO?

Researchers composed a literature review, distributed a survey, and conducted a focus group to understand the workforce and socioeconomic issues driving the shortage. The research team would like to thank Deb Moy of California Transit Works!, Carita Ducre of the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), Mona Babauta of SunLine Transit, and David Topaz of Sacramento Regional Transit (SacRT) for providing invaluable subject matter expertise and helping develop the areas of emphasis for this research. Finally, the research team would like to thank the agencies whose representatives volunteered their time for the survey and focus group: Alameda-Contra Costa Transit District (AC Transit), City of Escalon, City of Lompoc, City of Santa Monica Department of Transportation, El Dorado Transit Authority, FAST (City of Fairfield), Fresno Area Express (FAX), Gold Coast Transit District, Long Beach Transit, Los Angeles Department of Transportation, Mariposa County, Modoc Transportation Agency, Monterey-Salinas Transit District, Napa Valley Transportation Authority, Redding Area Bus Authority, Redwood Costal Transit Authority, Sacramento Regional Transit District (SacRT), San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS), San Luis Obispo Regional Transit Authority (RTA), Santa Barbara Metropolitan Transit District (MTD), Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transit District (SCMTD, or Santa Cruz Metro), San Francisco Municipal Transit Agency (SF Muni), SunLine Transit Agency, Tahoe Transportation District, Tri-Delta Transit, and Yuba-Sutter Transit.

WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME?

Survey results indicated that nearly all agencies across the state struggle to recruit and retain a sufficient transit operator workforce, and 50% of respondents reported significant or severe difficulty maintaining a sufficient transit operator shortage. A third of agencies surveyed expressed pessimism

about a long-term solution to the transit operator shortage.

The survey and focus group revealed that the most significant factors generating and exacerbating the shortage varies from agency to agency. Accordingly, researchers stress the importance of working with transit agencies directly when attempting to provide solutions to the transit operator shortage. All the same, when asked to rank a series of issues on a scale of 1 to 10, the most significant factors generating the transit operator shortage were (in order): Housing affordability (mean score of 6.59 out of 10), compensation and wages (6.2), the labor pool from which the agency draws (5.93), and the importance of seniority (5.38). Housing affordability received a modal average of 10, greater than any other listed factor.

In September 2024, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Senator Scott Wiener's Complete Streets bill into law.¹ This law requires all transportation-related state agencies to grant greater priority to the pedestrian, active transportation, and public transit experience. Along with other pieces of recent legislation (including but not limited to AB 2097 from 2022 and SB 125 from 2024), this puts transit agencies in the spotlight – but transit agencies lack the frontline workforce necessary to match the ambition of these statutes. Put simply, without an increase in the number of quality transit operators, these laws simply will not succeed. Therefore, researchers propose a Complete Streets legislative impact roundtable or town hall event with leaders from California transit agencies across rural, small urban, and large urban areas. Topics for discussion could include: Reforming transit funding mechanisms, safety and security reforms, operator-centric infrastructure improvements, mentoring and early career support, and the modernization of agency administrative operations.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This research provides measurable data that transit operators do not receive the respect, attention,

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and esteem that corresponds with the difficulty and importance of the occupation. The research also identifies the most significant factors generating the transit operator shortage were (in order): Housing affordability (mean score of 6.59 out of 10), compensation and wages (6.2), the labor pool from which the agency draws (5.93), and the importance of seniority (5.38). Housing affordability received a modal average of 10, greater than any other listed factor.

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Website link to final report to be included later.