Bus Operators in Crisis:
The Steady Deterioration of One of Transit’s Most Essential Jobs,
and How Agencies Can Turn Things Around
Presentation of TransitCenter report

• Report released on July 20th, 2022
• Authored by Chris Van Eyken, Program Manager, TransitCenter, Agency Practice
• TransitCenter is a foundation that works to improve public transit in cities across the U.S.
Operators in Crisis

- TransitCenter report detailing bus operator shortfalls
- Pursued this research after reading about pandemic-era labor shortages across the US
- Pre-pandemic, we had begun to look into bus operator job quality
- We held an event featuring bus operators in early March 2020
Research methods

• Interviews
  • Spoke with agency staff, former operators, union representatives, transit advocates

• Conducted desk research
  • Looked to past studies on the topic
  • Collected news items from across the US
  • Used economic data to identify trends inside and out of the transit industry
Findings – This is an industry wide issue

• The crisis is affecting agencies of all sizes. APTA survey found 71% of agencies have either had to cut service or delay service increases because of operator shortfalls.
• The problem is multifaceted – there are many causes yet they play out differently from agency to agency
• Today’s industry-wide shortfalls were projected by US DOT, DOL, and DOE in 2015 – many agencies saw this coming but could not prevent it
Findings – retirements are a key driver

• A “silver tsunami” is hitting employers across the US economy as baby boomers retire

• Transit workers are older than the average US worker

• Agencies are struggling to recruit and retain enough workers to replace retirees
Findings – declining job quality hurts attractiveness of position

- Declining job quality is a major factor in recruitment and retention struggles
- Pay raises have not kept up with cost of living—especially in transit-rich cities
- Schedules are difficult for operators with childcare and eldercare responsibilities—work-life balance is hard
- Operators assaults are on the rise
- Lack of access to restrooms, adequate break rooms

### Figure 2: Starting hourly salaries for operators in the top 7 transit ridership regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Starting Salary (hourly)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MTA NYCT</td>
<td>$25.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA Metro</td>
<td>$20.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MBTA (Boston)</td>
<td>$21.13</td>
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<td>SEPTA (Philadelphia)</td>
<td>$19.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTA (Chicago)</td>
<td>$24.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFMTA (San Francisco)</td>
<td>$29.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WMATA (DC)</td>
<td>$25.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings – this is a long-term crisis

• COVID has exacerbated, not caused, operator shortages
• Shortages are causing burnout amongst operators that stay
• Shortages are impacting agencies’ ability to recover from the pandemic – multiple agencies have had to respond with service cuts or cancel redesign plans
Recommendations for agencies

1. Rebuild the workforce by getting new recruits in the door: Agencies must make a more compelling pitch to potential hires.

2. Improve hiring processes: Agencies must improve response rates to applications, make the job offer more attractive with signing bonuses, and help applicants obtain CDLs.

3. Provide competitive compensation: Starting salaries must be competitive, and new hires should be on the fast track to median wages in order to improve retention rates.

4. Improve employee facilities: Restroom access and better employee facilities are needed for employee health and wellness.
Recommendations for agencies - continued

5. Support operators in their careers and lives: Operators need better mental health and professional development support.

6. Double-down on operator safety: Agencies must work to create more secure cockpits for operators, and take fare collection off the list of their responsibilities.

7. Provide flexibility in scheduling: Operators must be given greater control over their schedules despite the logistical challenges the change presents to agencies.

8. Listen to operators: Agencies must be more proactive in seeking out operator feedback and identifying workforce issues before they reach a crisis level.
How can the states help?

1. Fund transit operations
2. Expedite the processing of CDLs
3. Develop Second Chance Programs
What role can the federal government play?

• Use public and media appearances by Secretary Buttigieg and other agency leaders to bring attention to the issue
• Form an Interagency Task Force
• Issue comprehensive guidance and FAQs
• Elevate driver safety as a national issue
• Revise guidance around drug testing
• Launch national advertising campaign to recruit operators and mechanics
Link to the report: https://transitcenter.org/publication/bus-operators-in-crisis/

Questions?

Please contact Chris Van Eyken at cvaneyken@transitcenter.org