

CASE STUDY: “SOMEONE TO RELY ON” MENTORING IN THE PARATRANSIT SETTING

Mentoring programs are growing more common across transit agencies in the U.S., but most of them are specific to fixed-route operators and technicians. In Ohio, Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (GCRTA) and Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 268 have pioneered a structured mentoring program for paratransit operators, as well as fixed-route operators. This “mini case study” focuses on the paratransit mentoring program, including lessons learned from its first two years.



Photo caption: Operator mentees celebrating their graduation from GCRTA's Positive Impact Program in November 2023

service and within the same hours as the fixed route, and charge a fare no more than twice that of the fixed-route fare.

Paratransit operators have many of the same job responsibilities as fixed-route operators do, like operating the vehicle safely. However, in many locations paratransit operators also provide additional passenger assistance—for example, helping passengers to and from the vehicle, helping carry a few bags or packages, operating a lift, securing wheelchairs, and more. Operators' mix of trips changes day to day, and so they also regularly navigate new geographical territory and need to plan new routes between stops. These responsibilities make for a dynamic and sometimes challenging career, in which guidance from seasoned operators can be essential to new operators' success.

KEY DETAILS

Year program started: 2022

Number of mentors as of May 2024: 13

Number of mentees as of May 2024: 74

Paratransit Basics

Paratransit is a type of public transportation, just as fixed-route services are. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 required transit agencies to provide origin-to-destination service for people with disabilities who live in the fixed-route service area and cannot use the fixed route because of a disability. This service is often called ADA-complementary paratransit, because it is meant to complement fixed-route service and provide an equivalent public transportation option. For this reason, paratransit services cannot have restrictions on riders' trip purposes, must provide rides on the same days of

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- The program’s coordinators tell mentees they can talk to any mentor—and if they ask to change mentors, the program supports them in doing so.
- Coordinators give mentees a copy of the mentor application when they start work, to show them it’s a formal program and help them understand the qualifications their mentor has.
- After they complete their training, new mentees are given cards showing who their mentor will be and a fun fact about the mentor, to make the mentor less intimidating to the mentee.
- The mentor application is simple with straightforward qualification requirements. Both labor and management participate in the mentor interview.
- The program gives out things like free branded socks/hats to mentors to emphasize that they are appreciated for volunteering their time.
- New mentors are asked to recruit another mentor through word of mouth; prospective applicants are given two applications instead of one.
- Mentors have regular meetings with one another, to decompress but also to do structured activities like practicing how to talk to a mentee about a situation they’re encountering.

The Importance of the Joint Mentorship Program

As in fixed-route systems, [mentoring can be invaluable](#) for paratransit operators. Mentors provide soft-skill guidance, encouragement, and a listening ear on difficult days. The advice of a seasoned mentor makes all the difference for many new operators: “when you have someone to rely on, confide in, it really helps a lot,” said Terry Montgomery, GCRTA’s Paratransit Mentor Lead, who has also served as a paratransit operator for 27 years. Though most mentees are newly hired, mentoring is not exclusive to new operators at GCRTA—any operator can request a mentor, including senior operators or operators on employment probation after an incident. However, all new operators at GCRTA are now assigned a mentor once they have completed training through the joint-labor management mentorship program with ATU Local 268.

The launch of the mentoring program, called the [Positive Impact Program](#), was not without hurdles. There were a few false starts, in which union and management leaders struggled to align their approaches. But ultimately, the program prevailed. “We had been so close,” said Nicholas Biggar, the management-side mentoring coordinator, explaining that there had remained a strong desire on both sides to start a mentoring program and both sides were committed to working it out. “I think we’re stronger for having lived through those false starts.” Biggar also credited ATU International with playing a big role in helping the coordinators understand how to launch a mentoring program. Now, a union official participates in almost all mentoring events, and the buy-in and collaboration from both sides is visible.

- Mentors are also equipped with informational resources to pass along to their mentees as needed, like information on counseling and professional development opportunities.
- Without passing along confidential information, the program coordinators may let a mentor know if their mentee had a preventable accident or some other event to ensure the mentor knows to provide a little extra attention to the mentee's needs that week.

The Paratransit Mentoring Program – Coordination and Unique Context

The paratransit mentoring program maintains open communication with the paratransit operator training department. Trainers helped develop the mentor program and provided input on how to ensure mentors' responsibilities were kept separate from the domain of training. Trainers also pass along characteristics of mentees (e.g., "so-and-so is a little shy") to the mentoring coordinators in advance of employees exiting training to help ensure mentees are paired with a compatible mentor.

The heightened level of customer interaction involved in paratransit operations creates service and mentoring needs particular to this occupation. Paratransit is an "intimate" mode of transportation, as Vaneshia Houston, the paratransit district Transportation Manager, explained, and often requires a degree of passenger interaction, assistance, and service usually not seen on the fixed route. "Sometimes you have some of the best conversations you've ever had out on that bus," Montgomery said.

As with any such position, there are challenges, and mentoring supporting paratransit operators can make a meaningful difference. New operators, Montgomery noted, may try to do too much out of a desire to help their passengers, and mentors can provide them with "dos and don'ts" from their own experiences that will keep the operator safe. Passengers may have serious cognitive or behavioral health needs, which can put strain on an operator until they know how to handle difficult situations; mentoring can accelerate a new operator's learning and help them learn how to anticipate passenger issues. Having greater familiarity with driving smaller vehicles, as opposed to 40-foot-long buses, passengers may also be more inclined to give their drivers navigational directions or instructions about parking, and mentors can coach new operators on how to politely move forward with their own decisions in the face of such directives. Mentoring "changes lives because it helps you prepare" for these types of challenges, [said Deandre Parker](#), a Positive Impact Program graduate. "It's life-changing around here."

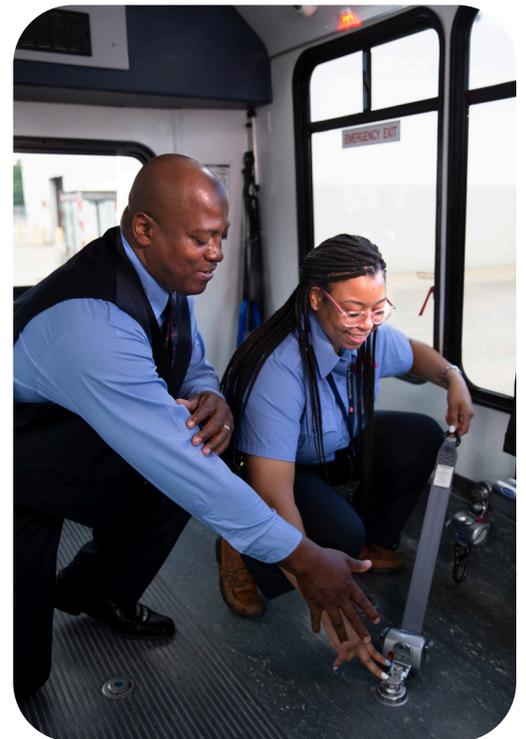
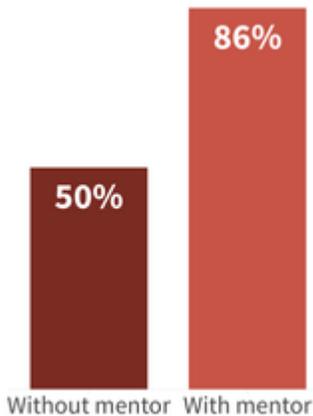


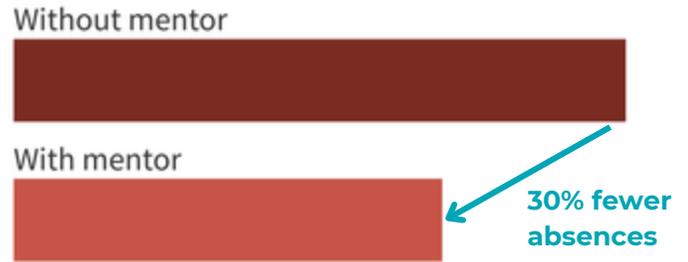
Photo caption: GCRTA Paratransit Mentor Lead Terry Montgomery with an operator mentee

One year after the Positive Impact Program launched...

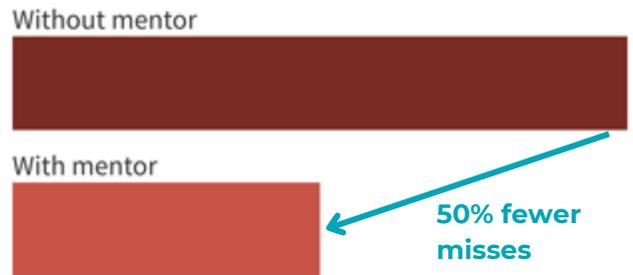
New operators paired with a mentor had a higher retention rate of 86% compared to their peers who were not paired with a mentor (50%).



New operators paired with a mentor had 30% fewer absences than their peers who were not paired with a mentor.



New operators paired with a mentor had 50% fewer misses than their peers who were not paired with a mentor.



RESOURCES TO START YOUR OWN PARATRANSIT MENTORING PROGRAM

- [Operator mentor interview questions](#)
- [Mentor recruitment flyer](#)
- [Mentor job description fact sheet](#)
- Want to start your own mentoring program? [Reach out to TWC](#) for technical assistance.

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