



Special Report: Challenges and Strategies in Paratransit Workforce Development

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Transit Workforce Center

Transit Workforce Center (TWC)

TWC, operated by the International Transportation Learning Center (ITLC), is the Federal Transit Administration's national technical assistance center for transit workforce development. TWC supports the workforce development needs of urban, suburban, tribal, and rural public transportation entities across the country.

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Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, paratransit has been a staple component of public transportation systems across the United States. ADA complementary paratransit provides transportation to people who, because of a disability, cannot use fixed-route service independently. Despite

the importance of this mode in the overall health of urban transportation infrastructure, very little research has focused on the development of the paratransit workforce since a seminal 2010 study on [paratransit operator recruitment and retention](#). This report aims to provide a brief update to the 2010 study, focusing not just on operators but on the entire paratransit workforce, including a range of frontline roles. To learn more about the unique workforce challenges of this modal context, as well as what successful strategies paratransit providers have used to combat those challenges, the Transit Workforce Center (TWC) research team conducted interviews involving 22 individuals across 13 paratransit systems in nine states. This report documents our learning from those interviews.

Key Context: Many paratransit services in the U.S. are contracted out to third-party provider organizations. According to [data from the National Transit Database](#), 80% of ADA complementary paratransit trips in 2023 were provided by services not directly operated by transit agencies. Sometimes these providers are small, single-location operators, while others are local subsidiaries of national or multinational parent companies.

Why workers choose paratransit

Over the course of our conversations, managers mentioned varied reasons that paratransit operator roles in particular can be attractive. Candidates apply to paratransit operator jobs because they will go home at the end of the day knowing they have helped people, and many paratransit operators are community-minded and highly motivated by altruism. “People identify



with paratransit because their family members have had [health or mobility] issues, or they have worked in a hands-on setting before,” one manager said. In light of growing documentation of assaults on fixed-route operators and a number of recent high-profile attacks, candidates may feel safer in the paratransit context where the customer base is seen as “more predictable and [riders] tend to be nonviolent,” a manager shared. Paratransit vehicles are also often substantially smaller than fixed-route vehicles; those candidates that are intimidated by a larger vehicle sometimes find paratransit jobs more approachable.

Who thrives working in paratransit?

Several of the managers we spoke to highlighted that frontline workers in paratransit, particularly operators, have to be a “special kind of person.” Managers reported wanting to hire people-oriented individuals who have strong customer service skills. There was a sense that driving skills can be taught, but the qualities of empathy and kindness are prerequisites to success in the job. Some riders get a great deal of meaning out of their interactions with their drivers, and in some cases the driver may be the only person that individual speaks with that day. The qualities of compassion and care that are needed among frontline staff on any public transportation mode are heightened in paratransit.

An essential industry, too often overlooked

Across many of the conversations we had, paratransit managers indicated that the demands of paratransit jobs, in combination with a comparatively low pay scale relative to the fixed route, made recruitment and retention challenging. “It does take a lot of training and can be highly stressful; it’s not an easy job,” a participant explained. Several spoke of pay disparities between fixed-route

operator positions and paratransit operator positions: in some locations, switching to the fixed route is tantamount to a promotion, even though paratransit riders have a higher level of need for assistance than fixed route riders typically do. “It feels intuitively like paratransit would pay more given the additional customer service responsibilities, but that’s not the case. And for drivers, fixed route feels like less work for more money. The attrition problem will continue until paratransit pays more. Paratransit is difficult work and it is devalued,” one person we interviewed said. Indeed, one location reported that its



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human resources office was not referring job candidates to the paratransit service at all, simply because the office had forgotten to ask candidates whether paratransit roles would be of interest. As a participant said, paratransit “shouldn’t be the appendix of transportation.”

Wages, benefits, and schedules: key drivers of recruitment and retention

Managers named wages and benefits as key drivers of recruitment and retention. At some services, paratransit employees received few benefits (i.e., no retirement contributions, few days of paid time off) and wages hovered only a little above minimum wage. “They’re not paid what they deserve,” one manager said. Conversely, those locations that felt their wages and benefits were locally competitive reported less trouble with recruitment and retention.

Like with fixed route services, paratransit operator schedules can be challenging for recruitment and retention. “Public transit has a very difficult schedule that can be hard on new hires. With a market where there are plenty of jobs available, new operators low on seniority will often leave very quickly for a [job] with a more stable schedule,” one paratransit manager said.

Effective strategies: What paratransit services are doing to develop their workforce

Recruitment

Across providers, paratransit managers reported using a wide range of recruitment channels. Many have used traditional recruitment methods like online or radio advertising, or distributing flyers at places of worship, workforce centers, and local government buildings like the Department of Motor Vehicles. Job fairs have also



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been helpful, especially those at which candidates can interview on site and leave with a conditional offer letter. Local driving schools and community colleges have provided good sources of candidates, as well. Some providers have done recruitment outreach to specific populations, like veterans (who often have CDLs and/or related technical skills).

Above all, word-of-mouth has been a strong recruitment strategy, as current workers are often the best spokespeople for an organization. For this reason, several providers reported offering staggered referral bonuses (i.e., the referrer gets a certain amount when the referred employee completes training, a certain amount when the person has been employed at the service three months, a certain amount after six months, etc.).

Creative Strategy: In online advertising, one participant shared that their service uses keywords to target Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) who were looking for new positions, as these professionals tend to be compassionate and have experience serving older adults and people with disabilities.



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Hiring

Once a candidate has learned of a position opening, paratransit providers must then navigate moving them through the hiring process. Following up with candidates right after they apply with next steps has helped services avoid losing people over a long time-to-hire interval. Paratransit managers also emphasized the importance of giving applicants a realistic vision of the job before they accept an offer, which has been done through test drives, “ride-alongs”, practice operating the lift on a vehicle, question-and-answer town halls for applicants, or viewing dash cam footage from real service hours.

Creative Strategy: “We have found that the more extra steps there are, like having to apply on your own computer, the harder it is to get people to do it.” For this reason, this paratransit manager set up an on-site location where candidates get help and tech support to complete a job application if needed. The manager reported that this support has definitely helped bolster the agency’s flow of applicants.

Compensation

In unionized locations, compensation is determined through collective bargaining agreements, reflecting negotiated priorities and local conditions. As a result, wage and benefit packages vary across the industry. Still, a number of paratransit services shared strategies they’ve found helpful in boosting recruitment and retention:

- Pay parity between paratransit and fixed-route services, and cross-training operators to be able to work shifts in either mode according to service needs and individual preference
- Bonuses for picking undesirable shifts (pay differentials)
- Bonuses for excellent safety record, good performance, and retention
- Tuition reimbursement
- Covered CDL training
- Allowing operators to keep their vehicles overnight rather than bringing them back to the garage each day

Creative Strategy: Managers shared that contractors cannot be required to engage in particular recruitment or retention-promoting activities unless those activities are stipulated in the contract. When using contracted services, transit agencies can use their contracts to the fullest extent to ensure paratransit workforce development is not left out. One agency in its contract with a provider identified workforce-related targets that need to be met and suggested strategies. When evaluating new contractors' bids, 20% of the score was graded on their ability to attract and retain talent, and the request-for-proposals required the provider to share information on wage rates and what benefits were offered. Another paratransit service allocates service area among several provider companies based on performance; though the broker presently only evaluates performance based on service-related performance indicators (e.g., on-time performance), workforce metrics could be embedded in this arrangement to promote competition.

Safety

Most agencies reported that passenger assaults on paratransit operators were not widespread, unlike [recent assault trends observed in transit](#) overall, which have likely been driven by an increase in incidents on fixed-route services. Nonetheless, public perception of assaults on transit workers can bleed into paratransit and deter applicants or cause retention issues. Paratransit services, in response, have been experimenting with operator compartment barriers and stickers communicating the criminal penalties associated with assaulting an operator. Other services are using safety apps, through which operators can efficiently report incidents once they have reached a safe location to do so. Finally, passenger education on service parameters and enforcement of customer guidelines can improve operator quality-of-life: as one manager said, “our rules emphasize that passengers cannot abuse our staff and there are consequences [for such behavior]....it’s not their job” to deal with harassment by passengers and the agency will suspend passengers that do not comply. Requesting that certain passengers ride with a personal care attendant when possible has also helped shift some safety risk away from operators.



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Culture change and worker voice

Improving workplace culture was a major area of emphasis in many conversations with paratransit providers. One manager emphasized that she does not micromanage her staff, while another discussed the importance of facilitating communication between people in different job functions. For example, at some agencies paratransit operators are given the opportunity to give feedback on their schedules, and also to go from time to time and sit with the schedulers to see the process of how manifests (daily documents listing trips assigned to a given operator) are assembled. This practice both gives operators exposure to one of their career options within the agency (in the event they are interested in advancing into a scheduling role in the future) and also shows what goes into a set of manifests. Two-way communication on schedules increases operator empathy for the difficulties of scheduling and vice versa.



At the same agency, short meetings were sometimes held between supervisory and frontline staff for positive reinforcement. Countering the age-old stereotype of being “called into the office” as a sign of forthcoming disciplinary action, this manager invites employees into the office, particularly those that had struggled with some aspect of performance, to

congratulate them on improving. The manager would, for example, show an operator in the computer system how their on-time performance had improved. Awards, peer-to-peer recognition programs with prizes, and other forms of appreciation for good performance were also helpful in building a positive culture.

Career pathways and advancement

Historically, paratransit services have lacked clear career pathways that prospective and new employees can contemplate moving through: as one manager said, “we haven’t done a good job communicating that these are professional positions.” This pattern is changing, however. Another manager

shared that they “constantly explain in orientation and during the interview the benefits, career opportunities, the pathways. The only way to do that is to invite people to the table and say, ‘if you’re really interested, we can create that path for you.’” Promoting from within is one strategy, though newly promoted employees must then be equipped with the training needed to successfully fill a new role with different responsibilities.

At another location, these discussions have gone beyond the hiring and training phases: the agency’s human resources office periodically goes around to different garages to share information about career advancement, tuition reimbursement, and other lesser-known benefits and opportunities within the agency.

Creative Strategy: In light of transit’s aging workforce, and U.S. population aging overall, transit agencies have a need not only to recruit the next generation of workers, but to retain experienced workers as long as they want to, and are able to, stay. Many older drivers prefer part-time positions; paratransit managers reported offering part-time roles (including outreach-and-recruitment positions and training positions) to longtime employees who wanted to step back from full-time employment but were interested in continuing involvement with the agency and passing along their knowledge.

What’s next?

Paratransit services know that to compete in today’s labor market, they will have to go above and beyond the efforts detailed above. We also asked paratransit managers what workforce development efforts they would like to undertake in the coming years. Responses included:

- Expanding benefits and raising wages; retention bonuses; pay during the off hours of split shifts
- Making greater use of contract language, including embedding employee appreciation requirements
- Onsite services like childcare, a local minute clinic, and a small bank
- Internship and job shadowing opportunities; “family day” and [roadeos](#) (a more common practice for fixed-route operators)
- Providing stipends for the managers at contracted provider companies to attend national conferences and network with their peers

- Greater technical assistance and skill development support for dispatchers
- Recruitment partnerships with local community colleges and high schools, to make students aware of the transit industry as a career opportunity
- Opportunities to gain certifications; tuition reimbursement
- Structured mentorship programs. Some paratransit services already have these programs underway, but they remain few. “Mentoring could help people feel like they can get through challenges,” one manager said. Indeed, evidence suggests that having a mentor to talk to helps improve retention.

Conclusion

While workforce development in paratransit has lagged behind fixed route efforts, the industry is showing signs of changing. We heard through our conversations with paratransit managers an awareness of the importance of investing in the workforce. Many of the locations with whom we spoke were at or beyond pre-COVID ridership levels, making the moment ripe for bolstering the workforce that will be needed to meet heightened demand.

Have a question or want to share your paratransit workforce development practices with us? Email us at twc@transportcenter.org.



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