When Via began this Best Practices project, we were not sure what we would find. Our goal was to determine how Via compared to similar agencies from around the United States. We hoped to learn what we are doing well, but we expected to be able to identify ways to improve Via’s operations. Some of the information that we were seeking was available in the National Transportation Database (NTD) Report, which collects data from agencies across the nation and identifies trends and averages in the transit industry, but the numbers in the NTD don’t always tell a complete story. The NTD report lumps together different types of transit agencies (municipal transit authorities, paratransit agencies, on-demand services), and the data they collect is self-reported which leads us to question how each agency defines various data (i.e., Via may define a revenue hour differently than another agency). This format makes it difficult to compare data from specific agencies across multiple categories.

To get a more accurate idea of where Via stands, we determined our criteria, outlined in this report, and began the process of connecting with other agencies similar to Via. We were able to learn a great deal through this process. For example: when we compared Via’s budgets to those of other agencies, we found we have one of the higher annual operating budgets, yet other agencies with similar budgets are operating on a much larger scale, and smaller agencies with similar services and clientele are working with far fewer funds. This information prompts us to examine ways in which Via can increase efficiency, and it also asks us to observe how our service addresses a more vulnerable population than other agencies and therefore places a higher demand on our drivers, vehicles, and other resources. We also recognize that public funding is diminishing in most areas.

Our Best Practices project has helped Via tell a candid and more nuanced story about our overall performance and helped us identify goals for future growth and sustainability.
PROJECT SCOPE AND OVERVIEW

In February 2018, Via’s governing board approved an ambitious project to visit transit agencies across the United States to gather data and collaborate to identify “best-practices” for paratransit agencies. Via’s project team interviewed nine agencies through the summer and fall of 2018 and were pleased to find that Via performs favorably when measured against other transit agencies in areas like annual budget, on-time performance, cost per trip, average miles per trip, and starting drivers wage. We were also able to identify several areas where Via can improve our performance as a paratransit agency and better serve our clients and community. Contained in this analysis is an overview of Via’s performance (and the performance of agencies we collaborated with), the areas we have identified as “best practices,” and possible next steps for this project.

AGENCIES IN ORDER VISITED

- Via
  Boulder, CO
- River Cities Public Transit
  Pierre, SD
- Manchester Transit Authority
  Manchester, NH
- Valley Regional Transit
  Boise, ID
- Era Senior Network
  Waukesha, WI
- Town and Country Transit
  Kittanning, PA
- Envidia (formerly Ambicab)
  Colorado Springs, CO
- Paratransit Inc.
  Sacramento, CA
- Indian River Transit
  Vero Beach, FL
- Lee Tran
  Fort Myers, FL

Via’s leadership team traveled nearly 9,000 miles to visit multiple transit agencies around the country and spent over 60 hours collaborating to share and collect data. Other agencies traveled a combined 10,000 miles to visit Via.

SUSTAINABILITY COMMITMENT

VIA’S SUSTAINABILITY COMMITMENT

Via’s focus on sustainable growth has long been part of our strategic goals. In 2010, during the final stages of construction of Via’s facility on 63rd Street in Boulder, a 97kW grid-connected photo-voltaic solar power system was installed on the roof of the maintenance wing. Installed by Lighthouse Solar at no cost to Via, the power from this system was directed back into the grid. In 2016, Via was named Boulder’s first Resiliency Hub, leading to a partnership between Via, the City of Boulder, Boulder County and Pos-En, a sustainable engineering firm. Through grants provided by the City of Boulder and Boulder County, Via was able to purchase the solar battery storage and natural gas generator required for off-grid operation, allowing Via to operate independently of the larger utility system to sustain a sheltering facility during a wide-scale disruption.

The installation of this generator system, designed and built by Pos-En, was completed in early 2018. This project resulted in the creation of a micro-grid which utilizes multiple sources of energy including solar, a Compressed Natural Gas generator, solar battery storage and standard electric grid feed designed to be flexible, scalable and adaptable. In early summer 2018, Via began installing additional solar panels, and we will continue to expand our solar array, utilizing the remaining space on the roof of our facility and other locations on our property. As technology improves and the price of solar, battery storage and other technology continue to fall, Via plans to seize opportunities to leverage sustainability through the growth of our renewable energy portfolio and investment in electric and other clean energy vehicles.

Via operates a fleet of over 80 vehicles, ranging from an electric Nissan LEAF and hybrid-electric Prius sedans to body-on-chassis wheelchair-accessible vans and 30-foot diesel powered HOP buses. We are acutely aware of the amount of energy that it takes to run an operation of this size and as such, we feel that it is imperative to lead the way in providing transit sustainably and effectively.

While the advent of the personal electric vehicle has arrived, sourcing renewably-powered alternatives to larger vehicles, the bulk of Via’s fleet, continues to present challenges; the most significant obstacle being the capital investment necessary to procure each electric bus and the amount of time it takes to receive each bus once ordered. Last year, Via secured funding for the first electric HOP bus, a 35-foot BYD bus and charging station, and we have been able to leverage this funding to include two additional buses and charging stations. These buses are slated to arrive in late 2018 or early 2019.

In the meantime, Via has begun to pursue other opportunities, leading to a partnership between Via and Loveland-based Lightning Systems, a global developer of zero-emission solutions for commercial fleets, to re-power a 2004 diesel bus with battery-electric systems. Recycling an old HOP vehicle allows us to extend the useful life of the bus by six or eight years while also reducing the investment necessary to go electric. This re-powered bus and charging station will cost roughly $260,000 instead of $800,000, the cost of a brand new vehicle. In October 2018, Via celebrated the completion of the re-powered HOP.

Our goals for a carbon neutral future must fall in line with the transportation needs of our community. We envision a future in which a resilient and robust community transit network uses electric and other clean energy vehicles to serve all of the transportation needs of our public, connecting individuals to the region as a whole through a system of local and regional transportation options. Via has already positioned itself at the table, and in the coming years, we plan to be a leader in the effort towards a more equitable energy future.
WHAT WE LEARNED PRIORITY AND NEXT STEPS

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

- Achieve data redundancy. Install a third remote server and hourly server snapshot. Safeguard Via's data against ransomware, viruses, and other unplanned outages.
  
  Timeline: 1+ years out
  Cost: $10,20K
  Notes: Significant infrastructure investment

- Improve RouteMatch performance. A separate application, database, and interface servers.
  
  Timeline: In progress
  Cost: Low cost, staff time
  Notes: Requires software downtime and coordination with Route Match in Atlanta.

- Improve Route Match training experience. Create a dedicated training room with multiple training PCs and an administrator PC to display content on large wall-mounted monitors.
  
  Timeline: Q1 2019
  Cost: $5k
  Notes: Configure call center conference room for training.

- Improve driver access to secure online information. Install two secure, private workstations in each driver break room.
  
  Timeline: In progress
  Cost: Low cost, equipment complete
  Notes: Structure Via's IT team for more specialization, cross-train staff, develop an IT internship program.

- Install real-time cameras and enable Wi-Fi on vehicles.
  
  Timeline: 2019
  Cost: Significant up-front cost, we will need a grant or other funding source to fully implement this project.

REVENUE GENERATION OPPORTUNITIES

- Targeted on-board vehicle advertisements and bus wraps.
  
  Timeline: In progress

- Brokering RouteMatch license to agency partners.
  
  Timeline: In progress

- Bus rentals for partner organizations. Wheelchair accessible rental vans, Transit vans.
  
  Timeline: We are currently identifying use agreements for our fleet (Q4 2018), WC accessible vehicle rentals by Q3 2019, Transit vans are en route.

- Contracting transportation services with local hospitals and clinics.
  
  Timeline: 1-2 years

INFRASTRUCTURE

- Cash counting machine for fare collection.
  
  Cost: Unknown
  Notes: It will hold drivers accountable for fare collection, and it will replace hours of staff time with machine time.

- Achieve data redundancy. Install a third remote server and hourly server snapshot. Safeguard Via's data against ransomware, viruses, and other unplanned outages.
  
  Timeline: In progress
  Cost: Low cost, staff time
  Notes: Requires software downtime and coordination with Route Match in Atlanta.

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- Install real-time cameras and enable Wi-Fi on vehicles.
  
  Timeline: 2019
  Cost: Significant up-front cost, we will need a grant or other funding source to fully implement this project.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

- Mobile app to book paratransit trips.
  
  Timeline: Target date late-2019

- Trained Travel Training volunteers.
  
  Timeline: Decision by Q3 2019
  Cost: Bus passes and vests for volunteers, salary for one full-time coordinator.

COMPETITIVE EDGE

- Continue to increase driver wages.
  
  Notes: Although Via measured favorably compared to other paratransit agencies for starting driver wages, we want to continue raising driver pay to remain competitive in our regional market.

- Environmental Justice
  
  Notes: Though not identified as a best practice during the course of this project, Via remains committed to our organizational sustainability goals.

- On Demand Pilot
  
  Note: Develop Via On Demand product to increase efficiency.

ESTABLISHING A BASELINE

NATIONAL TRANSIT DATABASE 2016 SUMMARY AND TRENDS REPORT VS. VIA 2018 PERFORMANCE MEASURES

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<th>NTD (Demand response)</th>
<th>VPT (paratransit)</th>
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<td>Unlinked passenger trips per vehicle revenue hour</td>
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<td>Cost per unlinked passenger trip</td>
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AMBITIOUS BEGINNINGS, AMBITIOUS NEXT STEPS

Best practices are largely accepted to be the professional procedures that are most effective. The transportation industry is collaborative by nature, so we are in the enviable position of not needing to re-invent the wheel in identifying what works well when running an efficient and sustainable paratransit service. In the spirit of collaboration, Via is going to present our best practices work to the national transportation community at the CTAA (Community Transportation Association of America) conference in 2019. We hope that other organizations can learn from our process and that they will be willing to share information from their own agencies. This will serve to augment our data and refine our definition of best practices. Our analysis will evolve as we collect and interpret information from more agencies. At some point in the future, Via may have enough work related to this project to sponsor a fellowship with our local university to compile, analyze, and distribute the data we collect. Ideally, this project will be ongoing and Via will publish and distribute an annual report.
These numbers tell a story about our industry through their comparison of data points of various transit agencies. Through this data, we can learn about the differences in each agency’s resources, expenses, and client populations. We can make inferences about the communities these agencies serve, and we can ask ourselves how our agency might operate more efficiently.