PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND HOW IT SHAPES TRANSIT'S FUTURE

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AN UNKNOWN FOE, UNFOLDING CRISIS, AND UNPRECEDENTED IMPACT

Transit agencies, just like every other element of American life, faced these three challenges in 2020 during the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Adapting to a continuously evolving situation became the new normal. The shared experience forged by an external force created common context for working together in new ways. As transit providers and community leaders take stock of the pandemic’s impact, we have an opportunity to build a better future with transit front and center, based on how we responded to the changes compelled by COVID-19.

What follows is the Community Transportation Association of America’s (CTAA) analysis of how transit rose to the occasion, acting as a catalyst for community response. In May and June 2021, CTAA interviewed transit leaders around the US to illustrate how they deployed their systems to help their communities, first to reduce food insecurity, then to ensure equity in vaccine access on a widespread scale. Finally, this paper concludes with six recommendations to leverage the new partnerships and flexibility necessitated by the COVID-19 era to durably improve access to opportunity.
A SNAPSHOT OF COVID-19 ADAPTATION

“I don’t think 2021 is going to look like 2019, and I’m not sure on the transportation side it’s ever going to look like 2019.” That’s how Stephanie Pollack, who oversaw Boston’s “T” transit system during her tenure as Massachusetts DOT Secretary, characterized the scale of the changes wrought by COVID-19.

Pollack, who is now Deputy Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration, says “part of our job and our challenge is to understand what’s changed, what is changing, and how we can continue to provide the service our customers need.” Let’s look at the changes compelled by COVID-19, from the pandemic’s early days to the rollout of vaccines.
SLOW THE SPREAD: SCRUB, SANITIZE, AND STAY SIX FEET APART

The COVID-19 pandemic’s early days were characterized by conflicting information about the nature of the new virus, its impact on everyday life, and how to stay safe. Remember when we thought we would need to quarantine for just two weeks to “flatten the curve”?

Transit agencies adapted service to support essential workers as they ensured the availability of food, medicine, healthcare, and other essentials. Before the National Capital Region experienced its first COVID-19 case, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) activated its pandemic plan and increased cleaning of vehicles, stations, and facilities.

To reassure riders, Portland Oregon’s TriMet published, “What happens if someone who might have COVID-19 rides a bus?” The video is a step-by-step walkthrough of their deep cleaning procedures to protect the health and well-being of drivers and riders, and ensure transit vehicles are safe to ride again. Agencies also asked riders who needed to continue using transit for essential trips to take precautions to slow the spread, like washing hands for 20 seconds with soap and water, using hand sanitizer, and staying home if they feel sick.
When public health officials encouraged everyone to stay six feet apart to help slow the spread of infection, transit agencies did their part. Houston Metro tagged seats as unavailable, and limited onboard occupancy on buses and trains to 50 percent. Turlock Transit installed floor decals to guide safe distancing while using transit. Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) permitted drivers to run drop-off only service once buses reached maximum safe capacity. In Maine, Casco Bay Lines structured its reduced ferry schedule to be operated by alternating crews, “thereby decreasing the likelihood of a suspension of all service.”

In April 2020, the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) published Recommended COVID-19 Safety Protocols, combining guidance from federal agencies with practical advice from public and community transportation operators. When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) urged Americans to wear masks to prevent COVID-19 spread, transit agencies began requiring masks while in transit. In the San Francisco Bay Area, AC Transit installed dispensers for disposable masks and hand sanitizer at the front of buses. The dispensers help customers who may have forgotten to bring a mask, needed a fresh mask, or preferred to double-mask for added protection. Eventually, the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) distributed 9.8 million masks to 458 transit agencies to provide to their customers.
NEW POLICIES AND PROTOCOLS: FARES, FRONTLINE WORKERS, AND FEDERAL FUNDING

As the crisis sent deepening shockwaves through the economy, environment, and everyday life, public transit pushed forward. Numerous agencies suspended fare collection to reduce the risk of exposure, especially among frontline workers. Toronto’s GO Transit, and Tampa Bay’s Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA), installed protective shields separating riders and drivers. Philadelphia’s Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) switched to rear-door boarding, reserving the front door for customers who requested accessible boarding.
Policymakers responded to the pandemic shock by giving transit agencies new financial and regulatory support. The federal government passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act in March 2020, followed by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRSSAA) in late 2020, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) in March 2021. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) quickly allocated emergency relief funds from CARES, CRSSAA, and ARP to its existing formula funding programs for large and small-urban areas, rural transit, tribal transit programs, and enhanced mobility for seniors and individuals with disabilities program. To answer questions related to the funding, FTA published a comprehensive pandemic FAQs covering emergency relief funding uses and requirements, civil rights protections, workplace preparedness, and transit agency pandemic responses.

Emergency federal funding enabled agencies to continue service for essential trips, replace lost revenue from lower ridership, provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and focus on new ways to support frontline workers. Pittsburgh’s Port Authority of Allegheny County worked with labor unions to shift its schedule to best serve essential workers, and enabled employees to use special administrative leave instead of personal sick time. The Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Authority (HIRTA) pandemic plan authorized the agency’s board to approve hazard pay for employees working during the pandemic. New Orleans Regional Transit Authority gave frontline employees $2,000 hazard pay, and 80 extra hours of paid leave.

To encourage innovative responses by transit agencies to meet urgent community needs, FTA permitted public transit assets including vehicles and facilities to be used for non-transit activities in response to COVID-19. This gave agencies flexibility to deliver meals to reduce food insecurity, transport PPE and cleaning supplies, and eventually provide access to COVID-19 vaccination. The FTA also provided information on how relief funding could be used at 100% federal share, with no local matching funds required, to pay for eligible operating expenses associated with these pandemic responses, including reimbursement for suspended fare collection to protect the health of riders and drivers, paying employees while they isolate in stand-by to ensure continuity of service in case other employees become ill, and expenses associated with meal delivery and vaccine access.
Because varying mask requirements in different states created confusion and conflict on public transit systems, US President Joe Biden signed an executive order in January 2021 promoting COVID-19 safety in domestic and international travel, creating the legal framework for a federal mask mandate. The CDC subsequently issued an emergency order requiring masks in transportation, and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) issued a security directive enforcing the mask mandate. This action gave transit agencies the backing of federal law to protect passengers and frontline transit workers with masks.

As COVID-19 vaccines gained approval for public use in late 2020, transit agencies sprang into action to support vaccine access for their communities, and advocate for transit workers to have the highest priority on the vaccine line. “Transit employees need to be prioritized to be vaccinated before they can start safely moving larger crowds to vaccination sites,” said Alicia Trost, Chief Communications Officer for Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART).
When California changed its vaccination distribution plan in January 2021, moving transit workers away from the front of the line, the industry spoke up. “They will play a vital role in the recovery – transporting millions of Californians to get vaccinated” said the California Transit Association and the Amalgamated Transit Union in a joint message to state officials. In March, the state changed course, and announced that transit workers would be prioritized for the vaccine.

Transit agencies across the country began offering free rides for vaccines, asking riders to simply show an appointment confirmation as they boarded a bus or train to vaccination. Agencies also turned transit stations into vaccination hubs, and used their vehicles to provide mobile vaccine clinics, bringing shots directly into communities. In March 2021, as vaccine availability increased, Acting FTA Administrator Nuria Fernandez reiterated that transit agencies could use federal COVID-19 relief funding to provide free rides and host vaccine hubs, saying “FTA funding programs can be used to set up and operate vaccination sites at transit facilities and support transportation services to and from COVID-19 vaccination sites.”

Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) set up a vaccine site in partnership with Bay Area Community Health, whose staff administered up to 900 shots per day to riders. Washington’s WMATA partnered with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the State of Maryland to open the Greenbelt Community Mass Vaccination Center. In its first month, the site administered more than 80,000 vaccines. “About 70 to 80 percent of the people who come to this site are those from historically underserved populations,” says FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer Craig Levy.

By late March, more than 450 transit agencies in 41 states provided free rides for vaccines. By early May, the number had grown to more than 550 agencies in 48 states, underscoring public transit’s commitment to communities large and small, urban, rural, and tribal.
“Whether it's access to healthy foods, healthcare, work, school or social services, CTAA members have proven they can provide safe, essential mobility throughout the pandemic,” says CTAA’s Scott Bogren. “Quantify the value of these essential trips and effectively communicate this to your service area. Get fluent in your essentialness.”

During the pandemic, CTAA was directly in touch with colleagues throughout the industry to track the innovative ways they are using transit to ensure equity in vaccine access, and reduce food insecurity – two of the most essential ways to support and protect their communities. Transit agencies rose to the challenge, with innovative approaches spanning large urban systems, small transit operators, rural systems, and tribal transit providers. Here are their stories.
Allegan County is a largely rural region in southwest Michigan, and its shoreline access to Lake Michigan draws visitors from the nearby cities of Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo. Public transportation is provided by Allegan County Transportation (ACT), started in 2000 by Dan Wedge, Executive Director of Services for Allegan County. Wedge has been with the county for 30 years, and previously served in emergency management roles in county government, so the transit agency has a strong connection to emergency management and response.
“Because the county is within the fallout zone for the nearby Palisades Nuclear Generating Station,” Wedge says, “we have an evacuation plan in place that incorporates transit, and we have a good relationship between transit, public health, law enforcement, and emergency management that comes from conducting regular preparedness drills.” Those relationships were critical to ACT’s COVID-19 response. Early in the pandemic, ACT ensured that COVID-19 positive riders had transportation to a space set up by the county for residents to quarantine, and for first responders to quarantine to reduce the risk of exposing their households to the virus.

In the fall of 2020, **ACT provided free rides for COVID-19 testing.** The Allegan County Health Department operated the testing clinic, located at the Allegan County Transportation Building, where 700-800 COVID-19 tests were administered between September-December 2020. The State of Michigan used the same facility to host three COVID-19 testing events that administered approximately 50 tests in early 2021.

ACT also partnered with the **Feed the Need Allegan COVID-19 Response Coalition,** to deliver food to homebound seniors, and provide transportation assistance to community members. Using the **Essential Services Request** form on the Feed the Need Allegan website, community members could request assistance from ACT for groceries and food banks, medicine and medical supplies, and other special transportation needs.

Also in the fall of 2020, a vaccine task force began planning to support the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines. The task force included representation from transit, local hospitals, emergency management, public health, and senior services, as well as Perrigo, a private-sector pharmaceutical manufacturer founded in 1887 in Allegan, and one of the region’s largest employers. Using a plan previously prepared during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, ACT prepared to provide free rides for vaccines. The Allegan County on Aging funded free rides for seniors, and the Allegan County Health Department funded non-senior free rides for vaccines. From February to May 2021, ACT provided 76 free rides to vaccination for seniors, and 28 trips for non-seniors.
The 24,000 square mile "Arrowhead" area of northeastern Minnesota is "similar in size to the State of West Virginia" says Brandon Nurmi, Assistant Director of Arrowhead Transit, the region’s public transit agency. Arrowhead Transit, the largest rural transit provider in the state, delivered 582,000 rides throughout ten counties in 2016. Ridership grew to 712,000 rides in 2019, then fell to 351,000 rides during the pandemic in 2020.
To protect drivers and customers, Arrowhead Transit suspended fare collection on its buses from March 23, 2020 to January 2, 2021, and partnered with St. Louis County Public Health to provide free COVID-19 testing, and free flu shots along with COVID-19 testing in January 2021. Arrowhead Transit provided free rides for COVID-19 vaccines, and coordinated with Scenic Rivers Health Services to reserve a block of vaccination appointments for those arriving by bus to get their shots and return home with minimal waiting.

Arrowhead Transit and its parent organization, the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Agency (AEOA), met the evolving needs of their communities by providing food and meal delivery. “Food boxes from the USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Distribution Program were brought to us by truck, and volunteers loaded them onto Arrowhead Transit buses for delivery to our partners to distribute in their areas,” says Nurmi. Arrowhead Transit also hosted free food distribution pick-up events at its Hermantown, MN facility.

Arrowhead Transit partnered with Northern Lights Community School to distribute meals to students eligible for free or reduced lunch, as well as to Headstart students. The agency also delivered one-day and seven-day shelf-stable meal kits in collaboration with Catholic Charities of Sandstone and Floodwood Food Shelf. Arrowhead also used its buses to pick up fresh produce grown by the Wolfridge Environmental Center, and deliver it to food shelves in Quad Cities, Ely, and Silver Bay. Nurmi reports that Arrowhead Transit delivered more than 38,679 meals between May 2020 and May 2021 using its rural transit buses.
The Cherokee Nation is a sovereign tribal nation whose jurisdiction spans 14 counties in northeastern Oklahoma. To serve 143,000 Cherokee Nation citizens throughout the reservation, the tribal government’s Cherokee Nation Transit program contracts with multiple public transit providers, including Cimarron Public Transit, KI BOIS Area Transit System, Muskogee County Transit, and Pelivan Transit. The tribal transit program provided 115,389 rides in 2019, up by 7,500 rides compared to 2018.

“We have five main areas of focus for transit: groceries, banking, government services, medical needs, and employment,” says Michael Lynn, executive director, Department of Transportation and Infrastructure in the Cherokee Nation government.
Of the five focus areas, Lynn says transit use for groceries and medical needs have increased during the pandemic, including rides to the Cherokee Nation’s nine tribal health centers for COVID-19 vaccinations. Cherokee Nation citizens pay $1.00 per round trip, and rides are free on Fridays. As of June 2021, the tribal transit program provided 276 rides to vaccines, and 543 trips to deliver meals to Cherokee Nation citizens. Awareness of transit opportunities has increased because of the pandemic,” Lynn says.

“People now know that there are transit options available to them,” and that’s driving increased demand for transit. To meet this new demand, PICK Transportation, an on-demand, curb-to-curb service for people of all ages began operating in June 2021. The service operates Monday-Friday from 5PM-10PM, and on Saturdays from 10AM-2PM, expanding the hours of transit availability in 21 rural counties throughout eastern Oklahoma.
Greater Dayton RTA – Ohio

Just as it did to celebrate its first day of service on August 8, 1888, Dayton’s transit system offered free rides in 2021—this time to beat a global pandemic. To ensure equity in vaccine access, Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority (GDRTA) began offering free rides to vaccines in March 2021, asking customers to reserve a ride up to a day in advance on its RTA Connect demand response and paratransit fleet.
By the end of May 2021, GDRTA provided more than 900 free trips to vaccines via demand response, and "more than 50 percent of the customers that booked rides had never used our services before" says Chief Customer and Business Development Officer Brandon Policicchio. He also says the agency provided 27 trips on group shuttles to vaccination locations, giving GDRTA another "opportunity to help folks who had never used our service before."

Reaching these new riders "drew more attention to how critical transit is to get people to vaccination and other public health priorities," says Policicchio.

As vaccine availability and interest increased, GDRTA expanded free rides to vaccines to its fixed route buses. The agency asked customers to display proof of a vaccine appointment on their mobile device or in print, or their COVID-19 vaccination card when boarding a bus for a free ride. In late March, GDRTA simplified the protocol with V for Vaccination, asking customers to simply display the "V" sign, also known as the peace sign, when they board a bus for a free ride to get vaccinated. GDRTA also added a free, weekly vaccine shuttle between its downtown transit center and vaccination clinics operated by Public Health - Dayton & Montgomery County. As of the end of May 2021, GDRTA provided more than 10,000 free trips to vaccines on its fixed route buses.

In April, GDRTA introduced its mobile vaccination bus in partnership with Public Health - Dayton & Montgomery County. "RTA reached out to Public Health to offer the bus as a mobile vaccination unit," says Policicchio. The transit agency retrofitted the bus, previously used for travel training and community events, to provide space for onboard vaccinations. The county public health agency identified locations to bring the COVID-19 vaccines directly into neighborhoods, and provided public health personnel to administer vaccines. So far, the bus has visited 17 locations throughout greater Dayton, says Policicchio, "mostly for first dose clinics, and will return to those locations for second doses on dates through July."
“Do you provide access and options?” That’s the central question transit agencies should be asking themselves,” says Robbie Makinen, CEO of the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA).

“We have four pillars—employment, education, housing, and healthcare—and it’s all about access. Ridership is a byproduct of that,” Makinen says. Ensuring people can get vaccinated in a pandemic exemplifies transit’s ability to provide access.
“When we went zero-fare, we started with veterans, then school kids, and safety net providers, so when COVID-19 came we were prepared,” says Makinen. KCATA introduced its Veterans Pass in 2017, giving 115,000 veterans access to zero-fare transit. In 2018, the agency introduced its Student Pass, providing unlimited access to transit for students in ninth-twelfth grade. In December 2019, the Kansas City Council voted unanimously to provide the $8 million necessary for zero-fare transit on buses originating or ending their routes in Kansas City. When COVID-19 vaccines became available, KCATA was able to immediately provide free rides for vaccines on its Kansas City fixed-route bus service.

KCATA also provided free rides for Jackson County residents to a mass vaccination clinic at Arrowhead Stadium. On March 19th and 20th, 2021 KCATA operated zero-fare shuttles every 30 minutes from eight locations in Jackson County. Residents received their vaccines on board the buses, and after a brief monitoring period to ensure no adverse vaccine reactions, the buses returned people to their pickup locations.

In May 2021, KCATA increased Saturday frequency on three bus routes serving a weekly drop-in vaccine clinic at the El Armory. The agency also added a stop for customers to transfer to one of the three routes reaching the vaccine site.

KCATA worked with Truman Medical System, and the Housing Authority of Kansas City to build a housing-transit-healthcare linkage to strengthen equity in vaccine access. The Housing Authority of Kansas City identifies residents eligible for the vaccine. Then, three days a week, Ride KC buses pick them up and give them free vaccination trips to Truman Medical Centers/University Health for COVID-19 vaccines. Through the partnership, called Cares Connect, the three agencies helped 40 people get vaccinated on its first day. “We care about people’s lives, and that’s what COVID really allowed us to do,” says Makinen.
When Washington State reported the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the U.S., King County Metro, the public transit provider for King County, which includes Seattle, seized the opportunity to support the most vulnerable members of its community.
“A group of King County Metro employees from across the organization met on March 10, 2020 to explore an innovative solution to a tricky problem: in the spirit of providing mobility to all, how can we help safely transport people who are COVID-19 positive?” That’s how King County Metro Public Information Officer Al Sanders describes the agency’s initial approach to the emerging challenge.

Working with Public Health – Seattle & King County, King County Metro began building a specialized service for COVID-19 transportation. The agency sequestered a subset of its Access paratransit vehicles, moved them to a separate operations base, and retrofitted them with partitions to isolate the driver compartment from the passenger area. Employees of MV Transportation, Metro’s contract service operator for Access, volunteered to be reassigned from their usual routes. “Public Health – Seattle & King County provided personal protective equipment, and trained operators in its safe use” according to the King County Metro COVID-19 Response and Recovery Report.
With vehicles ready, staff prepared, and a dedicated dispatch system in place, King County Metro launched Transportation for Pandemic Response (TPR) on April 3, 2020. The new service was specifically designed to safely transport COVID-19 symptomatic or positive people from homes, homeless shelters, assisted living facilities, and other locations to isolation, quarantine, and care facilities operated by Public Health – Seattle & King County. The retrofitted Access vehicles were used exclusively for TPR service, and disinfected before every trip.

Establishing TPR was “an opportunity to lead with our values of safety, equity and sustainability” says Sanders. Metro created the specialized transit service to ensure equity for all customers, including those who need to take transit for testing or treatment. The agency also wanted to support the smooth functioning of the region’s health system, and prevent ambulances and other emergency responders from being overwhelmed by a surge in COVID-19 cases. As of June 30, 2021, Sanders says Metro provided 5,063 trips for COVID-19 care through the TPR service. King County Metro embraced the challenge of transporting people who need medical care for COVID-19, exemplifying the promise of public transit to serve everyone, equitably.
In 2020, a photo of two school-age girls sitting in the parking lot of a Taco Bell in Salinas, California went viral. The girls were sitting outside the fast-food restaurant because they had no other way to access Wi-Fi for remote learning during the pandemic. In Monterey County, more than 11,000 students don’t have digital connectivity at home. “Distance learning has surfaced the true inequity that exists for so many of our students,” says Summer Prather-Smith, Senior Director of Migrant Education Region XVI for Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE).

To close this digital divide, Monterey-Salinas Transit (MST) mobilized its buses. MST provides bus service, demand-response service, and paratransit in the Monterey and Salinas urban regions and the Salinas Valley, covering 20 percent of California’s coast from Paso Robles to San Jose.
MST partnered with MCOE and deployed Wi-Fi equipped buses to 11 locations throughout the county, including school parking lots and the Salinas Valley Fairgrounds, so students could connect to Wi-Fi from these shared spaces. MST provided approximately 8,000 Wi-Fi connections in rural areas throughout the Salinas Valley, according to General Manager & CEO Carl Sedoryk.

Closing the digital divide was just one way MST responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of a 2014 Hepatitis A outbreak in California, Sedoryk says the agency already had protocols and a supply chain in place for personal protective equipment (PPE) and enhanced cleaning with hospital-grade disinfectants. This enabled MST to put pandemic procedures in place before California Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency. MST suspended fare collection from March to August, required masks while riding, and instituted rear-door boarding to maximize distance between riders and drivers.

Just before the pandemic arrived, MST had finished hiring and training a new class of drivers, bringing it to 100 percent of its needed complement of drivers. “We didn’t want to lay off transit workers in a pandemic,” says Sedoryk, “so we helped Meals on Wheels of Salinas Valley deliver approximately 10,000 meals to vulnerable community members, including seniors and people living with disabilities.”

To support COVID-19 vaccination, MST provides a free day pass to anyone who gets vaccinated. Customers simply display their COVID-19 vaccine card at any MST customer service location to receive a free day pass for each vaccine dose. As of mid-June 2021, MST provided 273 free day passes to members of the community for getting vaccinated. The agency also provided 259 free round trips to clients who used its MST RIDES ADA paratransit service for vaccination. MST also donated masks and surplus, retired buses to community organizations supporting agricultural workers, veterans, and hospitality workers, enabling the nonprofits to provide access to COVID-19 testing and vaccination.
"We are here and we’re not closed. If you need help with vaccine centers or other needs, call on us." That’s what Dorothy Yeager, Executive Director of OATS Transit, says the agency told state officials as Missouri prepared to distribute vaccines. OATS Transit operates in 87 counties throughout Missouri, and provided 1,420,691 trips in fiscal year 2019. OATS Transit gives seniors, people with disabilities, and people of any age in rural areas access to jobs, medical appointments, essential shopping, education, recreation, and nutrition.

“Although service was temporarily suspended because of stay-at-home orders early in the pandemic, service quickly resumed and we were there,” says Yeager.
In addition to regularly disinfecting vehicles, requiring face masks, and encouraging physical distancing, hand washing, and use of hand sanitizer, OATS Transit asked riders who use wheelchairs to turn their heads away while drivers secure their wheelchairs. This is a CTAA best practice for wheelchair securement to avoid any sudden sneezes that could expose a rider or driver to aerosolized droplets.

OATS Transit provided 1,025,692 trips in fiscal 2020, underscoring the importance of transportation for a variety of needs, including medical appointments, dialysis treatments, and access to supported work environments that provide supported employment for people with disabilities. The agency’s existing partnerships with area agencies on aging, hospitals, assisted living facilities, and senior centers are stronger as a result.

"We have provided more than 2,000 trips for people to get the COVID-19 vaccine throughout our 87-county service area," says Yeager, and "state officials have a greater awareness and appreciation that OATS Transit has buses throughout the state." OATS Transit has been able to weather the pandemic, and provide free rides for vaccines, because of federal COVID-19 relief funds provided through the CARES Act, as well as a $50,000 grant from Springfield, Missouri. "Federal funding was a godsend," Yeager says, "and we cannot thank FTA enough for that funding."
“With vaccination on the horizon, how could we make it as easy as possible for the public by coordinating our approaches?” That question guided the vaccine transportation collaboration between three transit agencies in Northern California, according to Rachel Ede, Deputy Director of Transit for the City of Santa Rosa.

Ede says that seeing the momentum for vaccination trips throughout the industry helped her and her colleagues at Petaluma Transit and Sonoma County Transit make the case to city and county officials to provide free rides, coordinated between the agencies to ensure seamless countywide vaccine access.

On February 15, 2021, Santa Rosa CityBus, Petaluma Transit, and Sonoma County Transit jointly announced free rides for COVID-19 vaccines, saying, “this service is in an effort to reduce transportation obstacles to vaccination centers and is valid on Petaluma Transit, Sonoma County Transit, and Santa Rosa CityBus and each agency’s respective paratransit services.” Santa Rosa CityBus also launched a free shuttle connecting the Downtown Regional Transit Mall and the county vaccination site at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds, with service every 20 minutes between 8:40AM and 5:30PM, enabling an easy connection to vaccines from bus routes throughout the county.

Ede says that because of three wildfire events in the past four years, CityBus has a strong relationship with their local emergency management counterparts, and experience with evacuation and moving first responders. The primary difference between those incidents and the pandemic was the prolonged duration of the pandemic emergency.
Ede says an existing relationship with the Area Agency on Aging helped CityBus build a relationship with their county public health counterparts by helping vaccinate in-home supportive services workers. Providing transit to vaccines was the next step in collaboration with public health, and came out of conversations about access and functional needs. In pandemic planning meetings, Ede shared what CityBus could do to help support community access to vaccines. “I also wanted to underscore the importance of transit to the community emergency response to help prioritize transit workers for vaccination,” she says.

As a result of the strengthened relationship, the county public health officer reclassified city bus drivers as emergency service workers to accelerate their eligibility for vaccination. This was especially important as CityBus prepared to add the free vaccine shuttle service between the downtown Transit Mall and the county vaccination site at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds. “Prioritizing vaccination sent an important message to frontline transit workers about how important their role is,” says Ede.
“We moved from transporting people to transporting food to people,” says Kirk Kuchera, Transit Manager for Southern Minnesota Area Rural Transit (SMART). The agency operates deviated-route and demand-response transportation for people of all ages, from seniors to school and preschool-age children in southern Minnesota’s Freeborn, Mower, Steele, and Waseca Counties. As the pandemic took hold, people stayed home, students switched to remote learning, and SMART looked for new ways to support its communities.
When the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) advised transit agencies across the state that they could use their transit buses as needed during the pandemic, SMART reached out to local partners to offer help. The United Way of Mower County immediately identified food insecurity as a risk for seniors and vulnerable people in the community. SMART mobilized its buses to transport bulk food from local warehouses to the Mower County Senior Center's kitchen for meal preparation. Starting March 23, 2020, seven SMART buses delivered an average of 860 meals/day for the next fifteen weeks.

Hormel Foods, a global branded food company headquartered in Austin, MN, purchased 300 meals every weekday from 12 local businesses to help them stay afloat during the pandemic. The businesses dropped off prepared meals at the company's SPAM Museum in downtown Austin, which was closed because of the pandemic. Museum staff, dubbed SPAMBassadors, and volunteers from the Mower County Senior Center loaded the meals onto SMART buses for door-to-door delivery to the homes of area seniors. “What happened in Austin was so many people coming together in a time of such uncertainty—a major food company, local businesses, senior centers, local students, parents, and teachers—to help those in need,” says Kuchera.

SMART also supported meal delivery in Albert Lea with two buses for six weeks, and provided three buses to support a one-time delivery of 1,000 shelf-stable meals in Owatana. SMART buses delivered approximately 55,000 meals from March 23 to June 30, and SMART coordinated logistics and planning for delivery of more than 62,000 meals on both SMART bus and volunteer routes throughout the region.
In addition to meal delivery, SMART suspended fare collection on June 1, 2020 to protect riders and drivers, and added a dedicated demand-response bus route in partnership with Hormel Foods. The route provides additional transit capacity to support safe distancing for essential workers, and covers shift changes at Hormel Foods, Quality Pork Processors, International Paper, and Smyth Companies, all considered essential businesses during the pandemic.

Ridership on SMART began to rebound in the fall of 2020 as some preschools and elementary schools resumed limited in-person classes under Minnesota’s Safe Learning Plan for the 2020-21 School Year. As the school year comes to a close, Kuchera says SMART plans to use its buses to help local public health officials bring people to COVID-19 vaccines, and get vaccines to people.
“Before the pandemic, you might have just known the name of another county official,” says Brian Baker, Director of SPARTAN Public Transit, the rural transit provider for 17 west Texas counties surrounding Lubbock.

“Now their number is in your phone, and we’re on a first name basis with each other. We also know each other’s capabilities so much better.”

Baker says he received a call from Hockley County officials letting him know the county anticipated receiving an allotment of vaccine doses, and needed a facility to host a vaccine clinic. SPARTAN had just opened its new Rural Mobility Center in Levelland, so Baker offered the new space. Two days later, on February 5, 2021, the transit facility’s first function was to help more than 600 people receive their COVID-19 vaccines.
SPARTAN also provided free rides to and from vaccines to anyone for whom transportation would otherwise be a barrier to getting vaccinated. For free rides to vaccines, “There are no age or physical ability qualifications,” Baker says. “The only requirement is that a person reside within the seventeen-county region SPARTAN serves, and outside the city of Lubbock.” Baker explained that the agency trained staff in its reservation center to help customers locate vaccination sites nearest to them while booking free rides for vaccination.

“Transit facilities like ours are an important part of the infrastructure in rural areas,” Baker says. In addition to the vaccine clinic, SPARTAN’s Levelland facility served as a coordination and distribution point for food delivery during the pandemic. Now that regional officials are aware of the facility’s capabilities, he sees opportunities for it to serve as a focal point for emergency management and multiagency coordination in the future, underscoring transit’s value as a critical part of community infrastructure.
STATEWIDE STRATEGY – NORTH CAROLINA

“We saw an opportunity for transit to show its value” in leading the state out of the COVID-19 crisis. That’s how Ryan Brumfield, Director of the Integrated Mobility Division at the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), describes the thinking that spurred a statewide vaccine transit strategy, the first of its kind in the country.

NCDOT and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) announced in January 2021 that they would disburse $2.5M in COVID-19 relief funding to 99 local transit systems throughout the state to cover the cost of providing free rides to vaccination sites. North Carolina’s transit agencies span the spectrum from large and mid-size operators in urban areas like Charlotte and Raleigh/Durham to small operators, rural transit, and tribal transit systems. Giving every provider the resources to provide free rides ensured transportation to vaccination, strengthening equity in vaccine access throughout the state.
Brumfield says the two state agencies "led the charge in making this the top priority" and worked together to put the statewide plan in place in two weeks. "We didn’t have time to get a lot of input," Brumfield says, explaining the compressed timeline meant they couldn’t engage in their typical process to gather input from transit agencies around the state about logistics and timeline before announcing the statewide strategy. A small number of agencies were concerned about an "added challenge in an already challenging time" but the vast majority were supportive.

Within days of the announcement, dozens of news stories covered the new availability of free transit to vaccines, bringing increased positive awareness to transit during the pandemic. In early May, NCDOT reported that more than 8,500 people had taken transit to get vaccinated, thanks to the statewide program. Of the state’s 99 transit providers, 82 have reported using federal funds provided by NCDOT and NCDHHS to provide free transit to vaccines, and have logged more than 100,000 miles on trips to get people vaccinated.

Wave Transit, serving Wilmington, North Carolina, is one such provider. The agency began providing free rides to vaccines on January 25, 2021. "We used our experience with emergency management, evacuation, and shelter shuttles during hurricanes and flooding to prepare for the pandemic, and provide free rides to vaccines," says Megan Matheny, Wave’s Deputy Director. Wave provided more than 300 rides to vaccines as of early May, and Matheny reported that number continues to grow, reaching 326 in early June. As a result, new ridership is on the horizon. Clifford Rode, Paratransit Manager for Wave, says "applications for Wave’s Dial-A-Ride Transportation (DART) service are up 300-400% versus before the pandemic, reflecting increased awareness of transit."
“When the vaccine is accessible and available right in your neighborhood, that changes everything, especially for low-income communities,” says Laura Koprowski, Deputy CEO of the Toledo Area Regional Transit Authority (TARTA). The transit agency that serves Ohio’s fourth most populous city provided free rides to mass vaccination sites throughout the spring of 2021. She says that when the Toledo-Lucas Health Department brought up the idea of transit to vaccination locations on a Monday, TARTA was ready to go with a plan by Thursday, and the service started the following week, showing agility and responsiveness in the midst of the pandemic.

As vaccine availability increased throughout the region, and demand declined at the mass vaccination sites, TARTA began to look for new ways to help reach Ohio’s goal of 70% of adults vaccinated by the summer. TARTA, Toledo-Lucas County Health Department, and the VProject community vaccination campaign worked together to bring vaccines into communities using a TARTA bus. “Using a bus as vaccine mobile unit eliminates technology, schedules, time, and transportation as potential barriers to vaccination,” explains Koprowski.
They dubbed the bus the TARTA Vaccine Mobile, and turned it into a rolling billboard showing a person receiving a COVID-19 shot. Koprowski says the health department ensured the image showed a shot being delivered high in an upper arm to accurately depict COVID-19 vaccination, right down to the details. Wrapping the bus with custom messaging cost approximately $6000, which Koprowski compares to the cost of running radio advertisements for several months. She says the attention and local news visibility generated by the TARTA Vaccine Mobile has paid off, quickly creating new opportunities to directly reach the community.

When the Vaccine Mobile set up shop at the “Shot for Shots” community vaccination event on May 21 at Toledo Spirits Co., healthcare workers noted that some younger people in attendance were surprised they were eligible for vaccination. “They didn’t want to step ahead of someone else in greater need,” Koprowski says. Because the bus was at the event, healthcare workers were able to reassure attendees that they were eligible, and help them get vaccinated. After seeing the Vaccine Mobile in action, local restaurant Mancy’s contacted TARTA and offered to host an event. “Known in Toledo as the best steakhouse,” says Koprowski, Mancy’s offered a free steak slider to anyone who got vaccinated on June 8.

By creating a transit-public health partnership, TARTA and the Toledo-Lucas County Health Department reassured the community that, “this is an official vehicle and operation you can trust,” Koprowski says, “and that’s especially critical for helping people in moderate to low-income communities get vaccinated.” As of June 11, the TARTA Vaccine Mobile has vaccinated more than 780 northwest Ohio residents.
In southern Maine, Biddeford Saco Old Orchard Beach Transit, Casco Bay Lines, City of South Portland Bus Service, Greater Portland METRO, Northern New England Passenger Rail Authority (Amtrak Downeaster), Regional Transportation Program (RTP), York County Community Action Corporation, and the privately-owned Concord Coach Lines provide bus, train, and ferry service. “We each do things a little differently, and that can pose a challenge for potential new riders,” says Greg Jordan, General Manager of Greater Portland Metro.

Facing common challenges from the pandemic, they saw an opportunity to align their work around three shared priorities: offset rider revenue loss, respond to and recover from the pandemic, and innovate the present network to make it more attractive, compelling, and resilient. “The pandemic gave us the pretext to get it off the ground,” says Jordan.

The agencies worked together with the Greater Portland Council of Governments (GPCOG), the metropolitan planning organization, regional planning organization, and economic development district for the region, and started TransitTogether with $160,000 in federal COVID-19 relief funding from the CARES Act.
In March 2021, the group launched transittogether.org, a website that provides information about regional transit options all in one place, including a seamless, regional transit map that displays all regional routes. The project will be promoted with digital, print, and radio advertising to build awareness, says Tom Bell, Public Information Officer for GPCOG.

After the website launch, TransitTogether added an interactive map of vaccination locations accessible by transit, created by GPCOG through its Resilience Corps program, a first-of-its-kind collaboration with AmeriCorps to support COVID-19 recovery. The map was developed by Sarah Baker, Planning and GIS Specialist at GPCOG, and Will Parker, an AmeriCorps Resilience Fellow. For each vaccination location, the map shows which transit routes provide service, how to make an appointment, and whether the location is open to the general public. The map also includes information on free rides provided by the state, and demonstrates the value of a shared platform that helps customers more seamlessly navigate mobility options.

In June 2021, the map was included in a report for President Joe Biden and his COVID response team on efforts that help advance the Biden Administration’s National Vaccine Month of Action. AmeriCorps says, “Given the mission of the Resilience Corps, it certainly seems like this easy-to-use, interactive transit map project is worth celebrating during National Vaccine Month of Action. In Maine, where public transportation is limited and therefore a great challenge given the geography of the state, this service is all the more vital. It’s a true example of AmeriCorps members in Maine stepping up to create innovative, real-world solutions to the challenges brought upon by the pandemic.” TransitTogether’s next step is a transit study focused on region-wide network design and interagency collaboration to streamline the customer experience. They plan to share the results of the study on transittogether.org alongside the regional map and service schedules. "Putting this information in the same place where people plan trips is a great way to ensure they see the work taking place to strengthen regional transit,” says Bell.
TWIN TRANSIT - WASHINGTON

Twin Transit provides bus, on-demand, and paratransit service for the twin cities of Centralia and Chehalis in Lewis County, Washington, midway between Seattle and Portland, Oregon. When the pandemic began to impact Lewis County, Twin Transit, Lewis County Seniors, and United Way of Lewis County worked together to deliver meals to seniors.

“In this partnership, Lewis County Seniors made the meals, United Way handled volunteer recruitment and fundraising, and Twin Transit managed delivery and logistics,” says Andrea Culletto, Community Relations Director for Twin Transit. Culletto says the group was able to meet growing need in the community, serving more than 4,600 meals per week to 658 seniors.
To support COVID-19 vaccination, Twin Transit worked with Lewis County Health and Social Services, and Bird’s Eye Medical to operate the Lewis County Mobile Vaccine Project (LCMVP). Because Internet access can be unreliable or unavailable in rural areas, Twin Transit operated a hotline to help residents book vaccine appointments, and arrange van transportation to vaccine sites. Twin Transit buses also operated fare-free until May 2, 2021, giving Lewis County transit riders free rides to vaccines on its fixed-route service.

“The goal of the LCMVP was to ensure that those living with mobility concerns or other barriers, like poor or no access to the internet, could access the COVID-19 vaccination,” explains Culletto. “By providing a call-in center and transportation for those in need, we helped ensure equal access to the COVID-19 vaccine.”

Building on the success of its work to reduce food insecurity, Twin Transit helped found the Lewis County Community Services Coalition (LCCSC) to bring together a diverse group of agencies and organizations focused on strengthening community resilience. “LCCSC organizations met multiple times each week throughout the pandemic to discuss, strategize and address a wide range of issues, including mental and behavioral health, food insecurity, senior health and wellness, access to essentials and services, information dissemination and more,” explains Culletto.

State representatives took note. Culletto says they “worked in coordination with the LCCSC to proliferate the model throughout Washington State.” The LCCSC is still going strong today. “By combining the skills and resources of diverse entities,” says Culletto, “the Lewis County Community Services Coalition is building a future of social stability, economic prosperity and limitless potential for our community – during and after COVID-19.”
Recommendations to Build on Pandemic Partnerships and Flexibility for the Future

“Public transit agencies need to think for the next 25 years, not the last 20,” says Robbie Makinen of KCATA. The “shock to the system” from the pandemic presents a generational opportunity for transit leaders to redesign customer experience, realign routes and schedules to meet new needs, and redesign service options to support shifting rider preferences.

This may be the largest inflection point for transit since the era from the late 1960s to early 1980s in which numerous public transit agencies were established to continue operating service previously provided by private passenger rail services and bus companies.

“The only way to truly manage the profound change and disruption brought on by COVID-19 is to be flexible. Community transit operators have always shown amazing flexibility in how they serve their communities and their passengers - and it's a skill we'll all need moving forward into the new normal,” says Scott Bogren of CTAA.

Here are six recommendations to move transit forward from the pandemic.
1. MAKE PUBLIC HEALTH A NEW FOCUS AREA FOR TRANSIT

Providing rides to vaccines and other preventive public health programs can help build new post-pandemic ridership at a time when agencies need to think beyond the 9-5 commute. From seasonal flu vaccine access to potential COVID-19 vaccine boosters, transit agencies have an opportunity to build on pandemic partnerships to strengthen the connection between transportation and healthcare outcomes in their communities.

Policicchio says, "Greater Dayton RTA is open to assisting with flu vaccine access, as well as potential COVID-19 vaccine booster vaccines if they become necessary." He also highlighted GDRTA’s partnership with Five Rivers School-Based Health Center and Dayton Public Schools to provide free rides for kids and parents to get immunizations, lead screening, and well visits needed for school enrollment.

Policicchio sees an opportunity to build on the success of COVID-19 vaccination trips to improve overall transportation for health care needs. "Our healthcare partners have been a huge aid in this, to show the impact of the lack of transportation on healthcare outcomes," he says. He urges federal officials to streamline operating funding to public transit from the 70+ existing programs across various federal agencies.

Policicchio cites non-emergency medical transportation as an example, saying, "NEMT money doesn’t flow to us. It goes to private providers. Public transit already has the vehicles to support NEMT, but needs operational funding to provide that service." Directing federal dollars for NEMT to public transit agencies would “ensure money is flowing to the best plans, and creating the best return on investment for taxpayers.”

Santa Rosa CityBus’ Rachel Ede says that prior to the pandemic, she "had a personal to-do list as transit manager to build a relationship with her public
health counterparts” to promote transit access to medical services, mental health services, healthy food, and outdoor recreation. Because of close collaboration during the pandemic, “we are on their radar now.”

Ede says the goal is to get through the pandemic, and get as much service restored as possible before the 2021-2022 school year starts in the fall. Then, she says, “there’s lots to explore together, like promoting transit services through public health channels, and exploring the potential for special fares to health resources.” Similarly, Kirk Kuchera of Minnesota’s SMART Transit says “healthcare access, public health support, and meal delivery could become a bigger part of the agency’s mission.”

Laura Koprowski at TARTA says “there is a natural overlap between public health and public transit to work together to help communities.” She cites vaccination collaboration with the Toledo-Lucas Health Department as the “start of a beautiful relationship” that could expand to include potential future seasonal vaccine collaboration, as well as coordinated marketing and communication for transit to public health initiatives.

“TARTA’s highest ridership routes all go to hospitals” says Koprowski. “The pandemic opened a great dialogue with major hospital systems like ProMedica,” and she says they were “thrilled that TARTA increased service for healthcare workers.” Transit agencies that provide more frequent and reliable transit service to hospitals also strengthen community access to healthcare, and that can improve health outcomes, especially for historically underserved community members.

2. MAKE FARE PAYMENT FAIRER AND MORE EQUITABLE

To reward customers for getting vaccinated, and promote transit use, GDRTA is giving a month of free rides to any customer who is fully vaccinated. When customers show proof of full vaccination to a transit ambassador at any of five transit hubs, GDRTA provides a $30 fare credit on TAPP Pay, its new fare
payment system launched in the Spring of 2021. As of the end of May, GDRTA issued more than 800 of the $30 fare credits to customers’ TAPP Pay accounts, giving those customers a month of free transit.

Migrating more transit riders to TAPP has an important equity benefit. The new system uses fare capping, which permits a pay-per-ride user to ride free after their individual fares paid equal the maximum daily or monthly rate. This solves the inequity in which riders who can’t afford the higher upfront cost of a monthly or weekly transit pass end up paying more over time than others who can buy unlimited passes. With the $30 fare credit on TAPP accounts, GDRTA is giving customers more than a reward for vaccination. The agency is also building equity into their future use of transit.

“Customers don’t need three different cards to buy coffee in San Francisco, San Diego and Monterey, so why should they need three different payment methods to ride transit in those three cities?” says Monterey-Salinas Transit’s Carl Sedoryk. MST is the first agency to introduce an open, contactless fare payment system that enables customers to use a contactless credit or debit card or payment-enabled mobile device to pay fares (think Apple Pay, Google Pay, or Cash App) instead of a transit-specific fare card. MST partnered with the California Department of Transportation’s California Integrated Travel Project (Cal-ITP) to test the new payment system.

Sedoryk explains the system provides a better experience for customers with simpler fare payment and more travel options. Under MST’s existing fare structure, a customer taking a $1.50-fare short trip within city limits would have to pay the $10 flat fare if the next arriving bus is operating over on a longer route, or wait for a later bus operating on the $1.50-fare short route. With the new fare payment system, a customer can tap in when they board the long-distance bus, then tap out after riding the short distance to their destination, and pay the $1.50 fare. The new fare system launched May 11, and in its first three weeks, Sedoryk reports the system processed approximately 1,500 taps.
Another advantage of the new contactless fare payment system: streamlined digital verification of eligibility for discounted fares. Integration with the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) will enable customers to register their payment cards with the DMV, which maintains the state’s registry of status for veterans, seniors, and people with disabilities. Once registered, a customer’s credit or debit card would automatically be charged the discounted fare for transit trips. This “gets transit agencies out of the identity business, while making the most of public resources” says Sedoryk.

Santa Rosa CityBus is “asking the Santa Rosa City Council to fund youth fare-free rides for the next 18 months,” says Rachel Ede. “The cost is expected to be under $200,000, and supports community economic recovery from the pandemic,” Ede says. Youth fare-free rides can lower the overall cost for families to use transit, and improve access to education and employment for young people. The Congressional Black Caucus supports fare-free transit for students as a policy to improve equity and access to opportunity for Black communities.

Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, funded by Sutter Health, found that student transit ridership grew by 127 percent after Sacramento Regional Transit (SacRT) launched RydeFreeRT, a program that provides fare-free transit for students in grades TK through 12, funded by a $1 million investment from the City of Sacramento. The UT Austin researchers found that students who had not previously used transit to get to school reported they were using transit more often to get to after school and non-school activities as well. “Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, students took advantage of the fare-free program as SacRT provided more than 1 million rides in 2020,” notes SacRT in its news release.

The UT Austin study found a statistically significant increase in students reporting that they used transit to get to school, along with a statistically significant decrease in students reporting that they used a car to get to school. SacRT says in its news release that, “This finding is in contrast to prior transportation research showing that, when fares are decreased or eliminated, new transit riders tend to be pulled from slower modes such as walking and
cycling, demonstrating that the program has potential to create a new generation of public transit riders."

VanGO, the local transit provider for Charles County in southern Maryland, is preparing to pilot fare-free transit for six months. VanGO maintained full service levels throughout the pandemic to support essential trips. Jeff Barnett, Chief of Transit for Charles County, says the fare-free transit pilot is a “huge step for equity and inclusion,” especially for riders “who have been through a lot” during the pandemic. Barnett says the agency plans to start the pilot after public health officials clear it to lift 50% pandemic occupancy limits, and return to full capacity on its vehicles.

Before the pandemic, VanGO received approximately $400,000, or 7.5% of its revenue from fares, and Barnett says the costs of fare collection, including maintenance, cash handling, and fare media account for half of that amount. Barnett also says that after a decade of use, the agency’s fareboxes are reaching the end of their useful life, and replacing them would add to the cost of fare collection. Fare-free service would instead enable the agency to reduce those costs, while enhancing equity and inclusion for riders.

Barnett says VanGO consulted Implementation and Outcomes of Fare-Free Transit Systems from the Transportation Research Board’s Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) to help plan its fare-free pilot. He says the pilot is possible because of provisions in the COVID-19 emergency relief legislation that permit federal funding for 100% of eligible operating expenses. With federal funding for operations, Charles County can move forward with fare-free transit to enhance equity for riders, while simultaneously making progress on critical capital projects that receive separate federal matching funds, like the forthcoming VanGO Transit Operations and Maintenance facility.
3. FOCUS FEDERAL AND STATE SUPPORT ON FREQUENT, RELIABLE SERVICE

Transit providers and policymakers face a new set of challenges that require rethinking how federal and state funds are invested in transit. The $69.5 billion in federal funding under the CARES Act, CRRSAA, and American Rescue Plan represents a milestone for federal transit funding in two ways: it requires no local match for COVID-19 related expenses, and it is the first time since 1981 that the federal government has provided significant operational funding for public transit.

Federal funding for transit operations—now in practice—is proving critical to keep service running. To ensure an even, equitable expansion of transit frequency throughout the country, federal dollars should continue to be used to fund transit operations for the multi-purpose riders who need frequent, reliable, round-the-clock service.

“I want Congress and the federal government to have a ‘Marshall plan’ to make sure buses are replaced and run well,” says Greg Jordan of Greater Portland METRO. He points to ridership losses before the pandemic, and says it’s because, “we haven’t been replacing the bus fleet fast enough nationally. That means buses cost more to maintain, and break down more,” which he says discourages ridership.

Jordan suggests Congress keep the local match temporarily suspended on the Section 5339 formula funding program for buses and bus facilities to accelerate fleet renewal. “Otherwise we issue debt for the local match, which will put cities and towns on 10 years of debt payments,” at a time when they need a chance for local finances to recover. Long term, however, the “local match is a prudent and good thing to ensure cities and towns have skin in the game,” he says.
Dorothy Yeager of OATS Transit also urges the consideration of temporarily suspending the federal requirement for local matching funding to purchase vehicles. “We have a vehicle deficit now, but the pandemic has reduced local match contributions from community partners who were impacted by the pandemic,” said Yeager. Yeager urges streamlining charter regulations. Current regulations prevent OATS Transit from being able to provide recreational travel that would be valuable to the community, and generate revenue to sustain transit service.

Brandon Nurmi of Arrowhead Transit says the Minnesota Department of Transportation has lifted the local match requirement completely on state operating grants for the 2020 budget year. This enables local transit agencies to rebuild their financial reserves with state grants, while using fare revenue to help with procurement of new buses to refresh and expand their fleets. As vaccination rates increase and restrictions lift, Nurmi says “some continued flexibility in federal funding and regulations would support Arrowhead Transit’s ability to deliver service where needed in rapid fashion.”

Nurmi says an extended time frame for pilots would could help build stronger ridership, he says, because it can take time to build awareness of new transit in areas that have stronger ridership. He continued to explain that this is because it can take time to build awareness of new transit in areas that have previously lacked transit options. NCDOT’s Brumfield echoes the message on pilots. He says, “More flexibility and incentives to pilot would help agencies become more nimble and adaptive to future disruptions.”

Rachel Ede of Santa Rosa CityBus says California’s requirement that agencies demonstrate 20% farebox recovery as a condition for state funding poses a challenge for pandemic recovery. She says it risks limiting creative ideas at a moment when transit agencies may not be able to reach the 20% threshold, and local partners may be unable to provide a 20% match until their finances recover. “If we demonstrate we are meeting county needs, and compliance with federal and state regulations, can there be flexibility for additional uses of our transit vehicles that serve the community and generate needed revenue?” says Ede.
Carl Sedoryk of MST would like to see consideration of exempting new technology like battery-electric buses from the required 20% spare bus ratio because, “agencies need as many vehicles as possible in service, and newer technology is more reliable than older technology, like diesel.”

Dan Wedge of Allegan County Transportation says “dedicated access to personal protective equipment (PPE) ready and waiting” would be helpful, especially for smaller transit agencies, and federal officials could improve efficiency and preparedness by coordinating this on a national level.

4. STRENGTHEN HIRING AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

“One of our biggest challenges is hiring. We can’t get enough drivers, and it’s a direct result of the pandemic,” says Brandon Policicchio of GDRTA. Attracting and retaining skilled employees is an ongoing challenge for transit agencies, and the pandemic has exacerbated this challenge. The focus on essential workers during the pandemic increased awareness of the core value of transit to communities. At the same time, safety and health concerns prompted by the pandemic have driven some people away from working in frontline jobs driving vehicles and interacting with customers. The industry needs to think creatively about building its workforce. Ryan Brumfield of NCDOT says a national salary study could help transit agencies hire more competitively in an increasingly tight labor market. Understanding the motivations of people who choose adjacent transportation work, like package delivery or ride-hailing, instead of jobs in public transit will help transit agencies strengthen their incentives and benefits to attract those people to transit.

Leveraging new and renewed relationships with community and social service organizations help to ensure that hiring opportunities reach people from disadvantaged and underserved communities. The Second Chance Program operated by Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) gives people who face challenges re-entering the workforce an opportunity to build skills and experience, qualify for potential permanent positions at CTA, and prepare for private-sector jobs.
Caryn Souza, CTAA’s Training and Certification Director, recently provided members a Top Ten list for sourcing and hiring drivers:

1. List your job openings using the word “drivers” instead of operators.
2. Use a well understood title to describe your driver position – instead of “Paratransit and Fixed Route.”
3. Promote your job openings on the front page of your website and make sure that it’s easy to find.
4. Create an Employee Referral Program. Reward employees who refer a person who completes the probation period.
5. Use your social media accounts to promote your driver openings. Use Indeed.com – #1 job posting site for driver positions using the free and paid for job postings.
6. Advertise your job openings inside and outside your vehicles.
7. Make sure your application is accessible on a cell phone; nationally 80 percent of drivers apply on a mobile device.
8. Set up your interview process to reply to the applicant the same day with a text, email or phone message. Set up your first interview within two days by phone call, Zoom meeting or in-person.
9. Create a “short” application form that takes less than 5 minutes to complete online. You can always have an applicant complete the full application after the first interview.
10. Create a realistic job preview video featuring your drivers talking about what it’s like to work for your agency, how clean the vehicles are, why they like what they do. Present a diverse group of drivers to appeal to potential recruits. Post the video on your website and social media platforms.

To attract people who might otherwise opt for ride-hailing, transit agencies should tune their messaging to emphasize the benefits of a career versus gig work. Working in transit has long been an important gateway to the middle class, and agencies should highlight this as they attract people with paid training programs for commercial driver’s licenses (CDL) for bus drivers, engineer and operator certification for rail, and mechanical skills for
maintenance careers. Agencies also need to ensure their cultures actively support employee growth and satisfaction, because those factors can directly enhance customer experience.

5. REDISEIGN ROUTES AND RUN MORE FREQUENT SERVICE ALL DAY

“Once you’ve experienced living at the scale of a neighbourhood, why would you go back to congested streets and a long commute?” That’s the challenge facing transit, according to Jennifer Keesmaat, former Chief Planner for the City of Toronto.

“It would be a waste to put it all back the way it was before,” Policicchio says, urging transit agencies to use this time to redesign service to be more resilient and useful. He also advises agencies to be cautious about how they communicate with customers about their financial state. “Don’t overpromise and make the cliff bigger. If transit agencies don’t adapt, that cliff is going to come when federal funding runs out.”

Greg Jordan of Greater Portland METRO echoes Policicchio’s concern. “You can’t just sit by and let the emergency federal relief funding bridge ridership losses to some future date without making improvements to the system,” says Jordan. “Otherwise, we will face a major physical cliff,” he warns. Jordan says Greater Portland METRO and its regional partners are focusing their forthcoming transit study on regionwide network design and interagency collaboration on how they can function for customers as a complete transit network.

As a result of the pandemic, Monterey-Salinas Transit is taking a “deep dive into service design,” says Sedoryk. MST’s Comprehensive Operational Analysis aims to answer the question, “where and how often should the bus run, and how should that change in the next two years?” MST is working on bus network
redesign options with significant community input, and is engaging the community as it drafts a new bus network plan it anticipates introducing in 2022.

Springfield, Illinois’ Sangamon Mass Transit District (SMTD) used the pandemic shutdown to redesign four of its bus routes to be more community-centric. SMTD says the Chatham, Riverton, Rochester, and Sherman “routes have been re-designed, changing the focus from being commuter-oriented routes to and from Springfield to being community-centric routes. Now, residents will have more frequent service that goes more places within those communities, including the local County Market and IGA stores.”

In addition to redesigning routes, agencies should run service more frequently. Greg Jordan says Greater Portland METRO is “anticipating that previous peaks are going to level out, so we can offer a more even level of service.” In contrast to an overall trend of transit ridership decline in recent years, transit ridership rose in metro areas that increased service frequency, including Houston, Texas; Portland, Oregon; and Seattle, Washington. The takeaway: running all-day service at a frequency so consistent people don’t have to check the schedule, or wait more than 15 minutes.

Operators should consider running more frequent service for longer hours, too. CT Governor Ned Lamont included funding in his biennial budget proposal to extend bus service in New Haven from its current 6PM end time to 1AM. Four of the city’s bus routes already run until 1:45AM, and the new funding would enable the rest of the city’s routes to keep running later, to better serve people who work in second and third shift jobs. Cincinnati Metro’s Reinventing Metro plan reintroduced 24-hour service on seven of the city’s busiest bus routes, bringing back overnight service for the first time since 1968. The agency projects that 343,515 jobs in Hamilton County will be within half a mile of 24-hour bus service.
Redesigning routes and running more frequent service requires dedicated, predictable investment in operations. The *Stronger Communities Through Better Transit Act (H.R. 3744)* introduced by Congressman Hank Johnson (GA-04) proposes $20 billion annually for transit operations, and would create a new formula funding program specifically to support transit operating costs. “As the transit industry emerges from a sustained period of ridership loss and service reductions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many agencies are considering service network redesigns to increase efficiency and win back ridership,” says Scott Bogren of CTAA. “Rep. Johnson's Stronger Communities through Better Transit Act is perfectly timed to provide both investment and direction in this important effort.”

At a moment when we are simultaneously emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, shaping federal infrastructure investment legislation, and advancing reauthorization of the 5-year surface transportation program, Johnson’s bill takes into account what we have learned in the last fifteen months from the pandemic. It structures transit investment to make “substantial improvements to service” and prioritizes underserved communities, areas of persistent poverty, and places with poor levels of existing service. “Simply put, people could get to more places in less time using transit. Jobs, schools, and other daily destinations that previously took too long to reach would become more accessible. People would feel less strain on household budgets as their transportation costs shrink. They would have more time to spend with their families as time spent commuting falls,” says Rep. Johnson.
6. EXPAND DEMAND-RESPONSE

Early in the distribution of vaccines, transit providers used their demand-response and paratransit fleets to provide free rides for vaccination. This made sense because vaccine eligibility started with seniors and people at high-risk for health complications if they contracted COVID-19, a natural overlap with paratransit. Some providers, like SPARTAN Public Transit, waived age and physical ability requirements usually associated with their door-to-door demand-response services, and provided rides to anyone who needed one to get vaccinated.

Greg Jordan says Greater Portland METRO is exploring the potential to mix fixed-routes and microtransit service to create a stronger transit network, with buses providing high frequency, all day service on core routes, complemented by microtransit in areas on the edge of the core service area. Microtransit could potentially help ridership grow to fixed-route levels, or simply serve areas well that don’t warrant fixed-route frequency, “freeing all of us to experiment more than we could before.”

Wave Transit’s Megan Matheny says the agency is preparing to introduce microtransit in partnership with New Hanover County and Brunswick County. The new service is slated to launch October 1, 2021. The state of North Carolina allocated $200,000 to each county, and Wave Transit is using $100,000 in state funding originally allocated for vaccine transit. By pooling resources, the transit agency and two counties are able to commit $500K to start the service.

In Oklahoma, Pelivan Transit partnered with Cimarron Transit, JAMM Transit, and KI BOIS Area Transit to launch PICK Transportation in June 2021. Funded by a $1.5 million grant from the US Department of Transportation, the 24-month pilot program offers on-demand, curb-to-curb service Monday-Friday
from 5PM-10PM, and on Saturdays from 10AM-2PM, expanding the hours of transit availability in 21 rural counties throughout eastern Oklahoma. “We’re trying to tap into people who take six or eight people and go eat...and then we can take them home,” says Kendra McGeady, Director of Transit at Pelivan Transit. “This after-hours transportation service” she says, “is going to free them up to be more flexible in their lives.”

Wilson, North Carolina launched its own microtransit system on September 1, 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. Within a few weeks, ridership on the new microtransit network was higher during the pandemic than it had been on fixed route service before the pandemic, says Ryan Brumfield of NCDOT. “The underlying demand is there, but transit wasn’t always meeting that demand,” Brumfield says. “Equal access in transit isn’t calling 48 hours before a ride,” Brumfield says, comparing advance-reservation transit to the get-in-and-go convenience for drivers. “The average wait time in Wilson is now 10 minutes with the new microtransit pilot, and that’s greatly closing the gap,” says Brumfield.

Brumfield says the state would like to issue an RFP for statewide on-demand service in a five-year timeframe. “North Carolina takes 8 to 9 hours to drive from one end to the other. A hybrid approach to transit that mixes fixed-route and on-demand service is here to stay,” Brumfield predicts, “because it opens up the potential to attract more people to transit that is more efficient.

On-demand service also offers an opportunity to introduce new mobility options in places that haven’t previously had public transit. Valdosta, Georgia began piloting a new on-demand transit service in the spring of 2021 that will serve the city on weekdays from 6AM-9PM. “We are unique in the fact we are not large enough to have that traditional public transit system that people usually think of, but we are large enough that we need to provide some public transit service, so this is a great meet in the middle,” says Mark Barber, City Manager of Valdosta.
The FTA is funding 80 percent of the costs for Valdosta On-Demand. “I see so much growth, I see so much goodness coming from this for the city of Valdosta. Use it to go to the grocery store, use it to go shopping, use it to go to the library, use it to go to school, use it to go visit a friend,” said Valdosta City Council Member Sandra Tooley.

COVID-19’s Challenge is a Generational Opportunity

COVID-19 exacerbated existing challenges for public transit, but transit agencies rose to the occasion and demonstrated their agility. Our industry continually adapted to changing conditions as the pandemic evolved, demonstrating how quickly and efficiently we can deliver transportation when we focus on breaking down barriers and making it seamless.

This response dramatically increased our collective recognition of transit’s vital value to society in communities of all sizes, and in places where people may not readily think of transit. Now, public transit providers and policymakers have an unprecedented opportunity to steward these new circumstances into sustained investment and innovation as we adapt to a post-pandemic future.
APPENDIX 1: COVID-19'S IMPACT ON TRANSIT AGENCIES

These statistics from the FTA Transit COVID-19 Response Program Information Collection illustrate the pandemic’s impact on transit as of May 31, 2021, based on a 98% response rate among transit agencies.

- 72% of responding transit agencies had reduced service because of the pandemic
- 30% of responding transit agencies had suspended service
- 37% are still operating reduced service
- 1% (35 agencies) still had service suspended
- 48,511 confirmed COVID-19+ frontline employees (13% positivity rate)
- 478 COVID-19 fatalities (.1% mortality rate)
- 47% vaccination rate among frontline transit employees
- 46% of transit agencies report they have received FTA funds to support vaccine access
APPENDIX 2: FEDERAL COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDING FOR TRANSIT

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act

- $25 billion for transit allocated by the FTA as follows, at 100% federal share:
  - $22.7 billion for large and small urban areas (Section 5307 formula grants)
  - $2.2 billion for rural areas (Section 5311 formula grants)

Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 (CRRSAA)

- $14 billion for transit allocated by the FTA as follows, at 100% federal share:
  - $13.26 billion for urbanized areas (Section 5307 formula grants)
  - $678.2 million for rural and tribal areas (Section 5311 formula grants and Tribal Transit Program (TTP) funds)
  - $50 million for Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities (Section 5310 formula grants)

American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP)

- $30.5 billion for transit allocated by the FTA as follows, at 100% federal share:
  - $26.6 billion in formula funding for urbanized Section 5307, rural (Section 5311), and tribal areas (Tribal Transit Program (TTP))
  - $50 million in formula funding for Enhanced Mobility of Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities (Section 5310)
  - $2.2 billion for additional pandemic-associated needs demonstrated by FTA grant recipients
  - $1.675 billion for the Capital Investment Grants (CIG) Program
  - $25 million in competitive planning grants
  - $5 million for competitive Tribal Transit Program (TTP) grants