



BUS OPERATORS + TRANSIT

From New Jersey to Denver to Los Angeles, transit agencies across the US are experiencing an alarming bus operator shortage. Driving a bus was once considered a stable path to the middle class, but the profession is now having difficulty with recruitment and retention. Bus operator positions now turn over more than any other at transit agencies.

Multiple factors are to blame. The lack of flexibility discourages applicants, who pursue opportunities as Uber or delivery truck drivers instead. The low wages and slow pace of advancement cause operator attrition. Interactions with customers over fares can be volatile, and instances of violence against bus driver operators are rising.

And there's also the health hazards - the stress and sedentary aspects of the job put operators at a higher risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and hypertension.

The national operator shortage is already having an impact on transit riders. Bus routes are being cut in Minneapolis and Denver, and in San Francisco, some buses are simply never leaving the station. For transit agencies already experiencing ridership declines, the shortage can't come at a worse time.

Nearly 212,000 operator jobs are estimated to open up by 2023. Without drivers to fill them, transit ridership could decline even further. Fortunately, some transit agencies are taking steps to improve working conditions for bus operators, but a much more comprehensive approach is needed.

3 ways to make bus driving a better job



1. Redesign the job for health and success.

Operating a bus requires hours of sitting, coupled with the stress of navigating through traffic and long waits between bathroom breaks. But it doesn't have to be this way.

- **Provide operators with access to restrooms.** The lack of clean, dedicated facilities for operators at the terminals of routes makes the job painful and distracting. Building more bathrooms or contracting with businesses to allow restroom access improves operators' quality of life, and the quality of their driving.
- **Create opportunities for physical activity.** Agencies should install gyms at depots staffed by trainers to encourage driver's wellness. OCTA in Orange County built a gym at each of their garages and hires a part time trainer and physical therapist to work with operators.
- **Reduce driver stress with all-door boarding and bus-only lanes.** Taking fare collection out of the operator's purview will reduce conflict with passengers and allow them to focus on driving. Dedicated and enforced bus lanes can also reduce the stress of trying to stay on schedule.

2. Raise the pay, and create clear opportunities for advancement.

The median hourly wage for a municipal bus operator in the U.S. is only \$24.47. Pay isn't the only problem - junior bus operators are forced to work grueling schedules for years without opportunities for advancement.

- **Increase the starting pay, and fast-track raises.** SFMTA's recent bus operator contract raised the starting salary and shortened the amount of time it would take to reach full salary.
- **Promote from within, and allow operators to apply to other positions in order to promote employee retention.** RTD in Denver has developed a Leadership Academy program to encourage operators to move up to management.
- **Create mentorship or apprenticeship programs.** VTA in San Jose connects operators with a mentor as part of on-boarding training so that new hires have someone they can go to with questions. This should be done in partnership with the local union.

3. Make bus driving more flexible

To make operating a bus competitive with driving for Uber or for a delivery company, transit agencies must incorporate more scheduling flexibility into the job.

- **Form a schedule committee to give operators the ability to swap shifts.** Obtaining time off is challenging for bus operators. Establishing a schedule committee would create a formal way for operators to trade days off with one another. This would benefit junior operators in particular, who often end up with the most arduous schedules.
- **Eliminate schedule restrictions for part-time employees.** Many transit agencies impose arbitrary restrictions on which shifts part-time employees can work. King County Metro recently renegotiated its contract with part time operators to allow them to choose from all shifts.
- **Reduce the number of "split-shifts."** Agencies often require operators to work split-shifts, which consist of an unpaid break between driving shifts. Agencies should develop schedules that decrease reliance on this practice.