

Trends Report 2020



Photo: Township of Schaumburg, Illinois





The National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) is a program funded by the Federal Transit Administration and administered by Easterseals and the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a), with guidance from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living.

NADTC's Mission is to increase accessible transportation options for older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers nationwide.

National Aging and Disability Transportation Center

Washington, D.C. 20003

Telephone and toll-free hotline: (866) 983-3222

TTY: (202) 347-7385

Email: contact@nadtc.org

Website: www.nadtc.org

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A Fixed-Route Response to Assisting Local Communities during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Introduction

While 2020 has been in many ways unprecedented, many transit agencies have continued to excel at what they do best – move people. With their employees deemed essential workers, most transit authorities across the country remained in service during the pandemic, while developing innovative ways to operate in our new normal. The core ridership of public transportation is the aging and disability communities; however, during this time of uncertainty transit agencies have stepped out of the daily routine to assist a community truly in need.

Many fixed-route systems stopped fare collection temporarily and required passengers to board through the rear entrance, to avoid contact with the driver; however still allowing persons needing a ramp or lift to use the front entrance. While on board, transit agencies encouraged mask usage and physical spacing, while communicating a message of safety and cleanliness. Although the social landscape has appeared a little different, riders still need to access everyday necessities like groceries, medical appointments and jobs. The following report discusses how several large urban transit agencies have stepped up to assist their communities during these trying times.

Challenges and Opportunities

At the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020, transit agencies encountered a new challenge: close their doors and face layoffs or transform the way transit services are delivered. A large majority of transit systems across the U.S. saw a decrease in ridership; allowing time for strategic planning efforts, enhanced cleaning regimens, and the development of new safety guidelines to ensure riders could feel confident in returning to transit for regular use. By the end of March 2020, the President signed into law, [H.R.748 – Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act \(CARES Act\)](#), which appropriated almost \$50 billion to be distributed to FTA recipients of both rural and urbanized areas, provided at a 100-percent federal share. The funding supported capital and operating expenses eligible under the Federal Transit Administration's [Section 5307 and Section 5311 formula programs](#) to prevent, prepare for, and respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

CARES Act funding has allowed transit systems across the country to not only recover some lost revenues but also invest in technologies or system improvements to prepare their transit system for future operations. Since the onset of the pandemic, Congress has enacted three emergency funding Bills, which include funding for transportation programs.

The following examples are just a few urbanized fixed-route systems that have assisted their communities, while ensuring that riders return safely to actively riding the bus again.

Local Examples

VIA Metropolitan Transit, San Antonio, Texas

When businesses, restaurants and schools started closing in March 2020, a lack of access to basic amenities like Wi-Fi technology to access online resources, especially schoolwork, became very apparent, particularly in high density, low-income neighborhoods. VIA Metropolitan Transit in San Antonio, Texas developed [VIA Cares – Connecting Our Community](#) to organize available resources for neighborhoods in need and match volunteers with opportunities to serve the community.



VIAtrans, WiFi locations)

the community and made available to students who may not have access to a reliable Wi-Fi connection at home. This free service was available through the end of the 2019-2020 school year, or as deemed necessary.

Bay Area Healthy Transit Plan, San Francisco, California

The Bay Area sought to welcome riders back to their system and wanted to convey a message of safety and reliability. The transit agencies within the nine bay area counties developed the “Riding Together, Bay Area Healthy Transit Plan” which commits to a shared responsibility of

limiting the spread of COVID-19. Within this plan, transit riders are asked to wear face coverings, physically distance, minimize talking to slow the spread, as well as encouraging touchless fares and the use of mobile payments.

Bay Area transit leaders have come together for the common good, SFMTA Director of Transportation Jeffery Tumlin states “economic recovery can't happen without transit. And transit doesn't work if our passengers and operators don't feel safe.” Area leaders are encouraging rider confidence, remaining transparent, and informing the public how to safely return to daily transit use.



Bay Area Healthy Transit Plan

By implementing these safety measures, Bay Area transit leaders have increased the confidence of older adult passengers as well as those with disabilities to feel as though they can ride safely and be as well-protected as possible when they need to use public transportation.

In July 2020, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) released a [15-Step Plan to Welcome Back Riders](#) as the region began to open back up, allowing riders to ‘reimagine’ transit service. The plan highlights several guidelines from the Healthy Transit Plan, but includes: using longer trains to allow for social distancing, reporting crowding data, implementing [new ventilation filtration](#) technologies and giving riders the option to purchase a personal hand strap to travel with you in an effort to reduce touch transfer while utilizing buses and railcars.

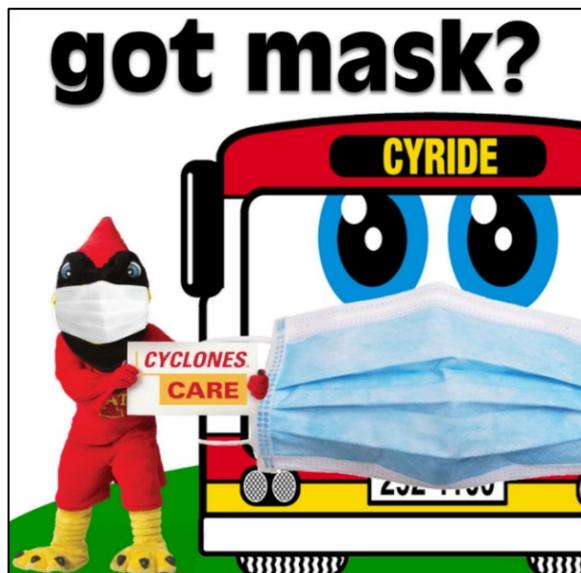
CyRide, City of Ames, Iowa

Under the purview of both the City and Iowa State University (ISU), the College of Engineering wanted to study the mechanics of airflow on-board buses and how that would affect bus riders. That information will be used to develop a best practice for maintaining rider safety, especially for the most vulnerable. Using computer generated wind-tunnel simulations, ISU staff and students were able to test various window and roof venting combinations allowing them to understand air flow patterns and ultimately determining how long air cycles into and out of the bus. The average speed of a standard 40-foot heavy duty bus is 13 mph, considering boarding and alighting, and with windows and vents open air can cycle through the vehicle at a rate of 51-71 seconds. Obviously, when more windows are open the more air circulation and purified the air can be. This [study](#), conducted in August 2020, indicates that when all windows and vents

are closed the circulation period nearly doubles, likely creating a problem when cold midwestern weather comes to the region.

Not only is this an area that rarely receives attention, but it greatly contributes to how the transit industry will continue to evolve into a new reality. Transit bus manufacturers and air filtration vendors can capture data from studies like this and enhance their products for future implementation, allowing for our most at-risk passengers to feel safe riding public transportation.

Like many fixed route systems, [CyRide](#) continued to offer daily service while working behind the scenes to determine the best method of keeping the community and its most vulnerable riders, older adults and people with disabilities, safe. In September 2020, following a citywide mask ordinance, [CyRide Cares](#) was launched in an effort to keep buses and riders safe, following “Five C’s – Clean, Cover, Contact, Chat, Clean.”



CyRide

Summary

Choice riders and transit-dependent individuals, those who choose to use transit over personal vehicles or who have no other choice but to use public transportation, will inevitably come back to transit, but transit agencies still must generate rider confidence for the entire community and those who rely on public transit for vital services – especially our most vulnerable riders, including the aging population and persons with disabilities. While many businesses and community services have temporarily closed their doors or limited the number of people who can be present in their buildings, public transportation remains in operation and has shown up to serve its community even when daily ridership has decreased to unsustainable levels.

They have supported their communities through food and prescription deliveries, mobile Wi-Fi hotspots parked within the community, by generating a heightened understanding of how air circulates through the bus for safe operations and the development of easy-to-follow guidelines for safely riding. Most citizens view public transit as only for certain groups of people, but more transit agencies have emerged as a visible and important service, demonstrating overwhelming support for those they regularly serve and the entire community.

References

VIA Cares – Connecting Our Community

<https://www.viainfo.net/cares>

15 Step Plan for Welcoming Riders Back

<https://www.bart.gov/news/articles/2020/news20200526>

Ventilation on BART: What you Need to Know About Airflow and More

<https://www.bart.gov/news/articles/2020/news20200813>

Riding Together, Bay Area Healthy Transit Plan

<http://www.healthytransitplan.org/>

CyRide Signals

<https://www.cyride.com/Home/ShowDocument?id=9943>

Transportation Adjustments for Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

https://www.iowastatedaily.com/news/iowa-state-university-ames-transportation-adjustments-cyride-parking-division-students-and-community-members-accommodations-disinfecting/article_e781c610-f14b-11ea-a343-23f52f4bd4db.html

Resources

National Aging and Disability Transportation Center – COVID-19 Resources

<https://www.nadtc.org/covid-19-resource-center/>

APTA - Health and Safety Commitments Program Toolkit

<https://www.apta.com/advocacy-legislation-policy/advocacy/ahscprogram/>

Community Transportation Association – COVID-19 Resources

<https://ctaa.org/covid-19-resources/>

U.S. DOT, FTA Coronavirus Frequently Asked Questions

<https://www.transit.dot.gov/frequently-asked-questions-fta-grantees-regarding-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19#CARES>



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