

This Research Brief is supplemental to *TCRP Research Report 245: Mental Health, Wellness, and Resilience for Transit System Workers*. The report was developed under TCRP Project F-29, “Mental Health, Wellness, and Resilience for Transit System Workers.”

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TCRP F-29

# Mental Health, Wellness, and Resilience for Transit System Workers

## Research Summary

Operators and other frontline transit workers face a range of adverse conditions while carrying out their work, including fatal crashes, exposure to passenger drug use, and verbal and physical assaults. Likewise, the public transit industry was experiencing an operator shortage even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic further exacerbated existing stressors and created new ones as frontline workers risked COVID-19 exposure at a time when information about the virus was quickly changing and agencies were managing frontline staff exposure with limited information and resources. As the US emerges from the pandemic, the transit worker shortage continues to be top of mind as transit agencies across the country work to increase service levels but continue to be impacted by a lack of operators, mechanics, and other personnel needed to operate normal service.

Difficulty hiring and retaining frontline transit workers appears to be the result of multiple factors with stressors from everyday working conditions being an underlying reason transit workers are leaving their jobs. This research aimed to understand and offer solutions to the factors that impact the mental health of frontline transit system workers and contribute to frontline worker attrition. The full research report provides a detailed summary of common factors that influence the mental health, well-being, and resiliency of frontline transit workers and includes a range of solutions that transit agencies can implement to address them.

### Key Findings

- **Frontline transit workers experience a range of difficulties in the work environment**, including assault (both verbal and physical), extended periods of sitting and stressful postures, exposure to potentially traumatic events, and the lack of restroom access.
- Aside from commonly well-known stressors, interviews yielded additional, less-well-known factors that impact the mental health and well-being of frontline workers including **challenges related to work-life balance**, difficulty managing **self- and family care**, **loneliness and isolation** in the workplace, **lack of support from managers** in the field
- COVID-19 had a profound effect on transit agencies and workers, making it even more **difficult for agencies to recruit and retain frontline workers** such as operators.
- When surveyed, frontline **transit workers identified barriers to using mental health services offered by their agencies**. The most commonly cited reasons affecting the decision to seek services through an employer were: lack of time (36%), concern about missed pay (33%), privacy concerns (32%), and being too tired/exhausted (32%).

### Research Methods

This research used a multi-pronged approach to understand the existing research and current transit agency practices related to frontline transit worker well-being and to gather feedback on the topic directly from frontline workers, agency management, and union leadership.



#### Review of Literature and Previous Research

80 References



#### Interviews of Agency and Union Staff

65+ Participants  
4 Large Agencies, 4 Medium Agencies,  
2 Small Agencies, 2 Sets of Union Reps



#### National Survey of Frontline Workers

1,000+ Responses



#### Frontline Worker Focus Groups

2 Rounds  
14 participants from 10 agencies

## Recommended Responses

Various themes emerged about how transit agencies should respond to worker needs and address their mental health, well-being, and resiliency. Based on the research, below are the actions agencies should consider to address the specific challenges frontline transit workers face.

- **Protect the physical safety of frontline staff and passengers** through physical barriers and by strengthening policies related to safety and security.
- **Adjust benefits and policies to provide more support for** attaining and maintaining good **mental health and a better work-life balance** among frontline workers.
- **Develop health and wellness programs** and communicate these resources to frontline workers in an accessible way.
- **Improve and diversify communication** and marketing efforts to grow employee awareness of available mental health and wellness resources.
- **Address privacy concerns** that are barriers to employees using resources by providing a range of programming types.
- **Provide training to help frontline workers** handle adverse passenger incidents and implement peer support and mentoring programs.
- **Evaluate the performance of employee assistance programs (EAPs)** and other mental health and wellness programs to improve offerings.
- **Improve trust, empathy, and communication** between frontline workers, agency management, and union leadership.

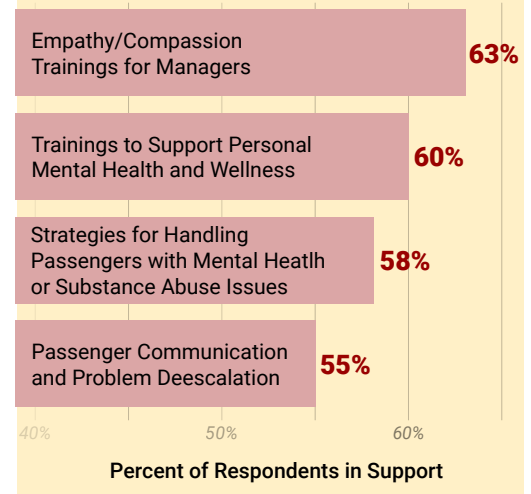
## Toolkit Contents

The research team also developed a toolkit designed for practitioners to support agencies as they create programs and processes to enhance mental health for transit workers. The toolkit includes:

- **Case studies that highlight exemplary programs such as:** Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority's 526 Resiliency Center that supplements typical EAP resources with mental health resources; MARTA's wellness program incentives to increase participation; and IndyGo's on-site mental health center.
- **Program Evaluation Framework:** Provides guidance on using a capability maturity matrix for program evaluation.
- **Evaluating and Improving EAPs and UAPs:** Provides a worksheet to guide the evaluation and improvement of employee and union assistance programs (EAPs and UAPs).
- **Establishing a Wellness Program:** Provides a worksheet to guide the evaluation and improvement of EAPs and UAPs.
- **Support Mental Health in the Workplace:** Offers a checklist for leadership and senior managers to ensure a supportive workplace.
- **How to Make the Case for Increased Benefits to Support Mental Health and Wellness:** Provides example messages, related statistics, and guidance on building a message.
- **Improving Communications and Marketing of Resources:** Presents recommendations for the improvement of internal marketing. Includes a worksheet with key considerations.
- **Building Trust Between Parties:** Offers a three-step process and worksheet for building trust among frontline workers, management, and union leadership.
- **Increasing Training Offerings:** Offers guidance on creating empathy trainings, leadership ride-alongs, and intervention training.
- **Providing Support During and Post-Incident:** Provides guidance on creating critical response teams. Includes a drill to prepare teams for interventions.
- **Modernizing Operational Policies for a Healthy Workforce:** Lays out policy suggestions and implementation guidelines for the modernization of operational policies.
- **Fostering Community Among Frontline Transit Workers:** Provides example activities and programs to foster community.
- **Developing and Implementing Mentor and Peer Programs:** Provides guidance for the development of a mentorship program and lays out types of programs available.
- **Self-Advocacy Tools:** Provides strategies and tips for understanding worker rights, dialogue with managers, partnering with HR, and peer advocacy.

In our survey, we asked:

**"What mental health or wellness training, if any, would be helpful if offered by your agency?"**



## About the authors

This research was conducted by **Foursquare Integrated Transportation Planning, Inc.** and **Rutgers University**. The team was made up by transportation, public health, and psychology professionals.

The principal investigator for this research, Sandy Brennan, is a Senior Transportation Planner and Project Manager at Foursquare ITP.