

**COVID-19 Recovery Listening Session #7:
Understanding and Addressing Changing Rider Needs
Tuesday, December 15, 2020 | 1:30 – 2:45 PM EST**

Henrika Buchanan:

Good afternoon. I'm Henrika Buchanan, Associate Administrator for Transit Safety and Oversight, and the Chief Safety Officer for FTA. Happy holidays, everyone, and thank you for joining us for the seventh and final COVID-19 Recovery Listening Session for 2020.

It's been a challenging year for the transit industry and the communities you serve. We expect that today's discussion will provide helpful information about how transit agencies are soliciting and incorporating information about the changing needs of their riders to restore ridership and rebuild public confidence in transit. We are aware of how busy you are and appreciate you joining us to learn and share ideas today.

Let me start by introducing FTA Deputy Administrator Jane Williams. She has led FTA since 2017 and focused on the Secretary's priorities of safety, infrastructure and innovation and worked closely with many of you to implement those priorities. She also manages some of the largest formula and competitive grant programs in the Department, including our latest and largest funding program under the CARES Act. Her background, including serving in the two previous Administrations under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, as well as spending time as a Senior Legislative Advisor on the Hill for Congressman Andy Harris and working as the Director of the Washington Area Transit Office for the Maryland Department of Transportation, makes her well prepared to lead our agency as we work to provide relief for the transit industry during this public health emergency.

Now I'll turn this session over to Deputy Administrator Williams.

Jane Williams:

Thank you, Henrika, and good afternoon. Let me begin by wishing everyone a safe and happy holiday season.

As many of you know, Henrika Buchanan has been invaluable in leading the Agency's response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Thank you, Henrika, for continuing to manage this very important work and thank you to your team for managing our outreach to the industry through these valuable opportunities for peer exchange.

Let me begin by thanking all of you for your dedication and resilience during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Your frontline workers continue to provide critical services to essential workers in healthcare, emergency response and food service— jobs that have sustained us over the past few months.

On behalf of the Trump Administration and Secretary Chao, thank you for your commitment to providing critical transportation services to the many Americans who depend on us every day.

We learn of stories every day about how agencies have been innovative throughout the COVID-19 public health emergency and FTA will continue to do all we can to support transit agencies in their recovery efforts.

Before we move to our panel today, I would like to take a moment to highlight the Trump Administration's whole-of-government approach in recovering from the COVID-19 public health emergency. Since the President signed the CARES Act into law earlier this year, FTA has worked around the clock to distribute \$25 billion in emergency assistance to help transit agencies across America respond to the public health emergency and to date, we've awarded more than 94 percent of CARES Act grant awards totaling more than \$23 billion in funding to states and communities across the nation, helping keep America and its economy moving.

Joining me today is FTA's Executive Director Matt Welbes, our FTA regional administrators and other leadership team members. All of them have been working with you to ensure this critical funding gets to you expeditiously, including our regional staff, who are our boots on the ground providing direct assistance to make sure grants are awarded quickly. Prioritizing the spending of this funding to support transit jobs and mobility for all Americans is critical as local economies continue to recover.

Under the Department's whole-of-government approach, and working with our partners at FEMA, USDOT distributed more than 100 million face coverings across the transportation network and as part of that we distributed more than 14 million masks to 2,200 transit agencies for frontline workers and riders to support safe operations.

Earlier in the public health emergency, FTA authorized all transit providers to use their FTA formula funds for operating and capital expenses related to COVID-19 while increasing the federal share to 100 percent. Eligible operations costs include costs associated with providing essential community services with transit assets such as meal delivery and WiFi access. Just last week, we announced that FTA will further extend access to emergency relief funding for operations to cover operating expenses for COVID-19 recovery through January 20, 2022 at 100 percent federal share.

In April, we announced relief from administrative requirements to allow more time for transit agencies to meet regulatory requirements for the Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan (PTASP) regulation. We also announced last week that FTA will refrain from taking enforcement action against grantees unable to certify compliance with the PTASP regulation through July 20, 2021, and for the Public Transportation Safety Certification Training Program regulation through August 20, 2022. We're taking these additional actions to ensure you can continue to prioritize your resources toward ensuring the safety of your frontline workers and riders.

In August, FTA launched an online platform to provide a national forum for the industry to exchange ideas and best practices regarding COVID-19 recovery. Executive Director

Welbes will tell you more about that in a moment. We have been hosting listening sessions to provide a forum for you to post your ideas and approaches because we all benefit from hearing directly from one another about what everyone is doing to adapt operations and ensure the safety of riders and frontline workers. We began in May, hosting a session with transit CEOs to discuss operational considerations for reopening transit and that event was so successful we decided to launch an entire series of monthly listening sessions. Last month's session announced the launch of FTA's partnership with US Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Public and Indian Housing to promote opportunities to help people access transportation, educational supports such as WiFi, food, medical appointments and other essential services. If you missed that or any of our other previous sessions, please check our website for presentations, recordings and transcripts.

As Henrika mentioned, today is our seventh and final listening session this year, but let me assure you that FTA's efforts and our partnership with you will continue. We plan additional sessions in the New Year and we'll do everything we can do to be a good federal partner during this challenging time.

As we strive to continue to meet your needs, I encourage you to keep engaging with us by offering suggestions for subjects you would like us to feature in our outreach efforts next year. Today, we will hear from three speakers from transit systems in Maine, California and Florida, and two speakers from a transit advocacy group in Minnesota about their efforts to better understand and address their riders' needs which have certainly evolved during this time of recovery. They will discuss their strategies and tools to manage operations safely and efficiently during the public health emergency and highlight what's working well and, quite frankly, what isn't. I'm certain we will benefit from their presentations.

When you registered for this session, you provided responses to several poll questions about how your transit system communicates with transit workers and the public and what platforms and strategies your agencies use in providing outreach to your communities. Matt will go over those responses in a moment.

You may also share additional thoughts and comments in the chat box on your screen. And with those housekeeping matters out of the way, let me turn it over to FTA Executive Director Matt Welbes to get us started. Matt?

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Jane. Happy holidays and good afternoon, everyone. I hope you're taking care. Let me add my thanks too for joining us today. As Jane said, we're proud to support the transit industry's COVID-19 response and recovery efforts with these listening sessions. I want to take this moment to remind you of FTA's COVID-19 Recovery Listening Session Forum. FTA launched this online forum earlier this year to complement these listening sessions, and give transit industry professionals an additional channel to exchange ideas and best practices. Many of you have been taking advantage of this forum and many of the ongoing discussions are particularly pertinent to today's listening session topic. For more information on the forum, including

information on how you can register and start engaging with your peers, you can download the handout available in the File Download box on the left side of your screen.

As Jane mentioned earlier, collaboration is key and we'd like your input as we plan topics for FTA's 2021 listening session and webinar series. While we have ideas on what matters most to you and your agencies, your continued feedback is paramount for successful partnership. So, use the chat box on the forum to continue the conversation with us and your peers.

Now we'll share the findings from our registration poll questions. We had approximately 766 participants register for today's event. Of those participants, we received 237 responses to our poll of transit provider representatives, each representing one transit agency. Here's what we learned.

Responding agencies with knowledge of ridership changes reported the following by what percentage of their pre-COVID ridership have returned. About a quarter have ridership between zero and 20 percent of the pre COVID-19 ridership level. Nearly a third have ridership that is between 21 percent and 40 percent of pre-COVID ridership levels. And over a third have ridership that is between 41 percent and 60 percent of the pre-COVID ridership level. Then about 1 in 10 of the agencies have ridership that is 61 percent to 80 percent of the pre-COVID-19 ridership, and 1 percent of the respondents have recovered and have ridership that's greater than 80 percent of pre-COVID ridership.

About half the agencies of the respondents said that transit-dependent passengers now make up a larger percentage of their ridership than before COVID-19. Nearly one in five of responding agencies said that transit-dependent passengers make up about the same share of their ridership as they did prior to the COVID-19 public health emergency, and then about half of respondents, 53 percent, indicated that their agencies have implemented service redesign efforts as a result of COVID-19. And these efforts include capacity, implementing mask policies and temperature checks, reducing service, and participating in community aid efforts such as emergency transport and food and grocery delivery. About a third of respondents said their agencies have conducted surveys to help understand changing needs of passengers and travel patterns during the COVID-19 public health emergency. Respondents are helping to ensure transit-dependent riders and essential workers can reach the transit services that they need with the following activities: keeping riders and employees safe by implementing social distancing and mask policies, implementing extra sanitizing procedures, and testing staff. And also, maintaining services by limiting service reductions, especially for high ridership areas, implementing free fares, and running schedules based on demand. These results demonstrate the many measures you're taking to keep people safe, restore passenger confidence and manage transit's uncommon operating conditions. We're grateful to everyone who has responded.

Now, we're going to begin the speaker presentations and starting with our first speaker, Steven Richard. Steven is the Director of Penquis Transportation Brokerage, providing services in Bangor, Maine. Steven, I'm now turning the session over to you.

Steven Richard:

Thank you, Matt, and thanks to all of you for tuning in today. I get to kick things off from the northeast corner of the country today in Bangor, Maine. I'm with Penquis. Penquis is a community action agency, and anti-poverty agency and we have both a community transportation department and a non-emergency medical transportation department as well.

Our service area fun fact is about 12,000 square miles, which is about the size of Massachusetts and Rhode Island. What we have in space, we lack in people. They all decided to live in Massachusetts and Rhode Island instead of here, so we only have 300,000 people living in that footprint. Another fun fact is if you Google oldest state in population, you'll get Maine, and that's an important factor for how we do business and what we do. It affects both our ridership and our driver base.

One last unique point I think that's worth sharing about who we are, what we do and our agency characteristics. We have a thriving volunteer program with about 170 active volunteers right now. We've had as many as close to twice that during, we'll say, better sometimes. So, of that, those volunteers provide almost half of our agency trips and miles every year. So, I think that in spite of when you look at these numbers, you see probably a small rural transporter. I think in spite of our size and geography differences and the differences in the trajectory of the public health emergency, I still think that there is a whole lot we can learn from each other.

You can advance the slide. Thank you.

I'm going to start, and our story really, a big date for us was March 17th. It was St. Patrick's Day. We had just spent the week reconfiguring our workforce to figure out remote work. We had implemented Teams to connect our operations staff internally. We also deployed a web-based transportation management system earlier the year before. So, those two things completely enabled us to shift to remote work almost immediately, all of our scheduling functions and most of our managerial functions were converted to remote.

But on this particular date, as we were readying people, they were packing up their computers and heading home, I called my management team together to figure out exactly how, from the other side of this, we were going to resume providing safe transportation to the public and how we were going to get them to come back and trust us again.

We spent two hours brainstorming and we've spent the last nine months constantly adapting, trying to implement what we've learned. A couple of realizations. First off, rules and guidance from the state were scarce and uneven, and didn't always match the situation of what was going on with the prevalence of the virus on the ground, so that posed some challenges. Safety supplies, already hard to acquire and getting harder all of the time, we couldn't see how we could possibly hope to operate without adequate supplies. We knew riders were afraid. We also knew our especially older drivers, who make up most of the pool, suddenly feared the same public that they had served so well

for so many years. And our drivers and passengers are both vulnerable populations in a lot of cases, so when we sat down that day it was truly brainstorming in the best possible way. We knew we would have to change just about everything we do to provide transportation. There was an old Arthur Ashe quote that came to me that day and it's been with me every day through the pandemic, and that's, "Start where you are, use what you have and do what you can." And it's just -- they're very simple words that really guided us through. It's been that type of an approach every step of the way.

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From that, we came up with the idea and the concept of frictionless boarding. Basically, we wanted to do any and every single thing we could possibly think of that would make a ride safer, it would dispel fear and would alleviate concerns of negative interactions. By April and May, we were seeing in the news, situations where store owners and other people were having these bad interactions with people around masks so we wanted to figure out some strategies to make it so that drivers weren't having these conversations. Maybe we could figure out how to get the information to people sooner so that there wouldn't be any surprises when they board and drivers' interactions and riders could be minimized.

What we did is we came up with a three-faceted approach to that communication. And it's all communications intensive. First off, we did something which I have a link provided. I'm not going to show the advertisement. It's there if you would like to see it. It's a short 30-second advertisement. We realized that the public was afraid and they did not even necessarily know the extent to which we were still operating. We wanted to get in front of them and let them know. We filmed with our local TV station a short 30-second spot and it demonstrated to people first off, we're open and we're running. Second off, we are sanitizing and doing everything we can to provide clean, safe transportation. And it showed our drivers and passengers masked and receiving riders. We thought that was a really good positive message to have out there.

Second, we have an IVR system, an interactive voice response system that we use. We have it mostly demand for [inaudible]. It's a lot of appointment taking. We call people and remind them of their transit appointments for the following day. What we did was we adapted our messaging and IVR system to call people the day before and to do a couple of things. First of all, to remind them about the masking requirements, and to remind them of course to call if they were going to be canceling. But finally, the other thing was that we wanted to make sure that they knew that we needed to make sure they were clear on our expectations and that masks could be provided, but they absolutely will have to wear one. Then the final piece is there's the questions, the screening questions for health conditions. We were able to get some of that done in advance so that people aren't surprised by the questions.

The final thing we did was with our call center. Normally a call center for transit is an inbound call center, so what we did was we turned it outbound and started dialing our customers and talking to them. Customers who had rides scheduled with us, talking to them about our screening questions for health, discussing masking and then spending

some time with each one addressing their individual concerns and fears. Our call times went through the roof but our overall call activity was so low, it really didn't hurt.

This was all a key to help promote safe riding behavior so the driver doesn't have to worry about these interactions so much if we could front load a lot of that.

I'll wrap up with just a couple of things that we learned. So first off, trust. Trust is the new currency. What we had taken for granted maybe in terms of the years that we had been in service with the community, we now have to build from scratch all over again and it's going to take time for them to visibly see our resolve to providing safe transportation over the long haul. This will be our work for the foreseeable future.

Second off, I think driver fears can be reduced by promoting self-efficacy. That is, give them the training and support so they feel they have the power to reduce the risks in their own environment. People feel great when they have options and they feel like they have power to change things.

Then third is the concept from public health called harm reduction. That suggests that even small measures that reduce even slightly the risk of negative outcomes are worth taking. Things like using more ventilation, plastic sheeting for barriers, all of those things help alleviate fears and worries, even if some of the fears remain.

Just as a parting thought, in Maine we've only had two outbreaks that have been related to transportation, one of them was an ambulance squad, and so that's a very small number considering the number of transportation encounters that happen on a daily basis. I know this comes from the hard work and dedication of transportation people all over working together to keep it safe, and I thank you all for your commitment to the same. Thank you.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Steven. Our next speaker is Lauren Skiver. Lauren is the CEO and General Manager for SunLine Transit Agency providing services in Thousand Palms, California.

Lauren, I'm now turning the session over to you.

Lauren Skiver:

Thank you so much, Matt, and thank you all for being here today. SunLine is a small transit agency in the Coachella Valley, so a big shout out to all my smalls on the call. If you don't know where the Coachella Valley is, if you've heard of Coachella Fest, Palm Springs, or more importantly SunLine's hydrogen program, then you know where we are. There's a little bit on the screen about who we are. We run 80 buses, paratransit service and we're really most noted for running hydrogen fuel cell vehicles and battery electric vehicles. Our long history of alternative fuels is something that we're proud of and we continue even through COVID, and I'll talk a little bit more about that as we go.

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Like all of you, I'm not going to bore you with a bunch of statistics about the chart. We've all seen these charts. We're all tracking these charts internally. But what I do want to talk about is some of the things we've done to support the riders and most importantly, our employees during the pandemic. One is getting out in the system. It may be counterintuitive to get people out but we've really had most of our administrative employees spend the bulk of the time out in the system, either on the street team or handing recharge kits to our operators so they see we're out and riders see that we are out supporting our operation and ensuring that both the cleanliness of the stops and buses are checked on by our executive staff. Giving our drivers, whether it's a granola bar and a Gatorade or it's popcorn, was a way to start the conversation. Many of our employees hadn't been out on the system as much as they would like to, and so by having something to hand someone, it's an immediate conversation starter. That was a really successful part of how we interacted with all of our staff with our frontline operations. I think that's really important all the time, but even more important during a pandemic.

We started a Ride with Confidence campaign that our marketing department came up with. Bus shelter ads, wrapping buses, talking about what we're doing to clean our facilities, clean vehicles on a daily basis, was important for riders to see that we're taking the pandemic seriously and that we are stepping up our cleaning activities and making sure there's PPE available for both riders and for our staff. A quick and easy way that the marketing team did that was having pretty inexpensive bandanas printed with our logo that we handed out to riders early on in the pandemic. It was not only a way to get someone a face covering, but it was a way to advertise our services as people were either moving about in other destinations or on the bus. The team did some Facebook competitions with those bandanas, and so it was a way to have some positive message around the fact that you couldn't board a vehicle without a face covering and minimized any kinds of altercations or work that our operators had to do to make sure that they enforced that.

We have seen ridership starting to level out as far as how far it's down, but I think we're all still faced with what are we going to do to see some of our choice riders come back and some of the folks that were using our service for trips that may have not been transit-dependent trips but for work and other destinations.

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I always bring a message -- one of the things that I did as a CEO and my executive team early on is our message to our organization is one of optimism. People can't have their whole world negative, and COVID has created where either work and home can be negative and there can be impacts in both places. We decided early on we had to create positivity at this organization, have things to work on, have activities that kept people engaged but were about optimism and not about the negative or uncertainty we may have in the future.

We've been planning a redesign for several years and we decided to accelerate that redesign. It gave everyone an opportunity to think about a new service, that we would emerge as a new transit agency as we move through the pandemic.

Refueled is what we call it. We're an alternative fuel and hydrogen program so Refueled is we think a very appropriate name and it has several factors within it. We are redesigning the entire transit network, we're reducing our 15 lines to 9, we're straightening and speeding up the system. We're also launching our own rideshare program. I just wanted to make a quick note. We've been doing rideshare longer than anyone else in the industry and I think sometimes transit has forgotten that. Yes, TNC made it more convenient as an algorithm-based app, but just remember, we've been doing it with taxis and other types of services for more than 20 years. So, we're going back to the model using an app and that way we employ the taxis in our valley who have been suffering before COVID and certainly during COVID. And then, introducing a new regional line once the colleges are back up and there are in-person classes is another way that we see improving our system and helping to build back ridership. We went down to a Sunday service. We knew that redesigning the system was going to be quite disruptive if we were to do it at any other time, and so that was one of the silver linings of the pandemic was to accelerate the changes and bring back this new service for our riders.

I think "thinking outside the box," as my colleagues have said, there isn't a playbook for this pandemic. It challenged all of our leaders to think quickly and to be okay with making mistakes. I think that's one of the other silver linings that we've all learned as a team. Not everything is going to be perfect. Not everything is going to work out perfectly, but we're going to do our darned best to support our employees and riders and we're going to stay optimistic while doing it.

Some fun things to think about. We had a TikTok video contest within the organization. It was fun. It was something that kept our minds off of the other things we've done. We've done virtual ugly sweater parties. We've had Game On where we all play games via Zoom. I think thinking about optimism and making sure that your organization is looking towards the future and how we will emerge. We've been doing this business for many, many years and we will continue to do so. We will continue to meet our community's needs and we'll continue to be the mobility choice in our communities that we serve. Thank you very much.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Lauren. Our next speaker is Will Schroeer. Will is the Executive Director of East Metro Strong, a coalition of business and public and private partners in the cities and counties who work together to bring together more and better transit professionals in the Eastern half of the Twin Cities region of Minnesota. Also joining Will is Russ Stark, and Russ is the Chief Resilience Officer for the City of St. Paul and Board co-chair for East Metro Strong. Will and Russ, I'm now turning the session over to the two of you.

Russ Stark:

Thank you. This is Russ Stark with the City of St. Paul. Will is going to do most of the talking here but I will just kick us off with a little introduction of who we are and why we're on the call today.

East Metro Strong is a public private partnership between seven cities, two counties, many employers and the St. Paul area Chamber of Commerce. We work together to bring more and better transit and sustainable transportation options to the eastern part of our metropolitan area here in the Twin Cities. For those of you that don't know the Twin Cities, the historical development has been a little bit faster and stronger in the west metro, and so at East Metro Strong we're trying to help rebalance that equation with stronger transit options in the eastern part of the metropolitan area which is centered in the City of St. Paul. We provide policy leadership, advocacy and support for member initiatives across the board.

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In response to COVID, we feel strongly that our local transit agency, Metro Transit, has done a great job responding in every way that they possibly can. We know that our ridership, like that in most urban and suburban areas is still down considerably and that transit service capacity has been reduced at times. Certain types of service, particularly the express service from the suburbs into the core cities has really declined dramatically in use and therefore, service reductions have taken place. Rightly or wrongly, people are concerned still about using transit. We also think this is a key moment in time, though, where there's an opportunity to really be communicating to folks as hopefully we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel here about the opportunity to continue to move around our community without necessarily needing to own a private automobile. And that we know that in particular, people who may not be able to afford cars, especially in a time of economic uncertainty, are making difficult decisions right now about their transportation options and modes, for both right now and the years to come, and that we know that once people do buy a car they're a lot less likely to use transit.

With all of that in mind, I will turn it over to Will to describe a program that we are working on in response. Will...

Will Schroeer:

Thank you, Russ, thank you, Matt, and thank you to everybody at FTA for these listening sessions. I've found them just extraordinarily valuable.

As Russ said, we're adding a slightly different perspective to this call and I hope that it's valuable to you. If you can advance the slide?

We're working a little bit in a different spot. The presentations we've heard so far and certainly underlying the work that Metro Transit has done here in the region to make people feel safe and comfortable on transit is invaluable. At the same time, we know that people reevaluate their transportation decisions in times of change and that can be

when they move, when they move their home, when they move their job/ [inaudible]. They ask how am I getting around and do I need to reevaluate now that things are changing? Nothing has changed more in people's lives than COVID, and we're hearing from folks that maybe now I want to buy a car. And, Russ went over the reasons why Metro Transit and we are both concerned and without in any way suggesting what people should do, we want them to know that they don't have to buy a car in order to participate in society in the region.

So, with that in mind, we are partnering with HOURCAR and Metro Transit to make sure people are aware of their options at this point and going forward. We started talking with users and hired community-based organizations to organize some of their members and residents in their neighborhoods and just start the conversation about how they're feeling about transportation now, what their current needs are before we got into any specific questions about HOURCAR, transit or anything else.

We really did start with a clean slate but perhaps not surprisingly, folks expressed a lot of concern and anxiety about their transportation options at the moment. Everybody understood their transit options and most people understood what transit agencies -- Metro Transit isn't the only one in the region -- were doing to keep them safe, still concerned. 'There are a lot of people on the bus, even if they're all wearing masks. I'm not wild about it,' et cetera. And a couple of people acknowledged that even in the city, Russ was right, that most of the express routes had taken the brunt of the service cuts, but even in the city some of the service frequency is down, particularly upon late-night services, et cetera and they just didn't have the options that they used to have. So, what to do?

We introduced the idea of car share: Do you know about it? Do you know that it's been in the cities for a while? Just had some good conversations about that. Then we took those responses into account and developed the materials that we are now launching to improve folks' awareness of transit and car sharing going forward.

Here's the meat, if you would advance the slide.

We want to let people know you don't have to buy a car. We've always wanted people to know that. Again, COVID is a driving opportunity to reinforce that message. I'm sharing -- we're launching this campaign literally this week. We're getting the final materials out. In this case, we're swapping the order of the car and the bus so the bus is on the left and the car is on the right in the new materials. You're getting it in real-time, but we like this idea because it reinforces the idea of both, that buses may not be able to go everywhere and you can pick up this car to continue your trip if you need to. But they also may stop running at some point, particularly overnight, and so when the bus stops say at 8 or 9 p.m., but you need to go to work or you need to get back from work, et cetera, doesn't end, this is an opportunity. Getting that message out without in any way -- and just among us several hundred friends here, casting aspersions on the transit agency's ability to provide service or anything else -- just a purely positive message about how these two modes can work together.

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Another version of works with transit, get off at your stop, go wherever you need to go. All of the HOURCAR hubs are located as close as possible to popular transit stops. In a lot of cases for various reasons, they are not right at the stop. That's something we're working on, but a practical challenge that I'm sure you can appreciate. But it should be possible to get off and continue your trip for that first-last mile challenge. We want to let people know about that.

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We developed some special materials for the holiday season. HOURCAR surveys its members pretty frequently and the number one use for the HOURCAR is the Target run. If you're not from an area of the country served by Target, it's the big department store/grocery store. I guess in a lot of cases it would be a regional equivalent of Walmart in some cases. But we want to make sure that people know that even if you're getting around by transit most of the time, you don't have to buy a car to get those presents, et cetera.

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And finally, while restaurants, et cetera are closed, we want to acknowledge getting takeout is kind of a timely thing that people are doing. And try to have a little fun here. Get takeout, don't take out a car loan.

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As I mentioned, we're launching this week. We're doing a variety of online advertising and then we're also working with those same community-based organizations to get the message out to their members and really try and get some grassroots awareness going. I will acknowledge that this didn't move quite as fast as we would have liked. HOURCAR in particular is still a -- they do a fantastic service but spend most of their time doing that rather than developing advertising. That's been a little bit of a challenge for us, but we've gotten really great response from the community members we've talked to and everyone is delighted to have this new opportunity to think about transportation options that don't involve necessarily buying your own car.

We're all looking forward to the end of the COVID tunnel. At the same time, I think just about everybody thinks this is going to be an issue for quite a while still in 2021, and so we're going to continue this advertising in partnership with Metro Transit beginning in January when various advertising contracts turn over, so we're excited about that.

Thank you very much.

Matt Welbes:

Will and Russ, thank you both.

Will Schroeer:

I still have 30 seconds left.

Matt Welbes:

Please continue.

Will Schroeer:

I have 30 seconds left.

I just want to emphasize that folks are really concerned and they're still making decisions now, and so we're here to work with our partners to help give people information and options. Thank you very much.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you both. Our final speaker is Carlos Cruz-Casas. Carlos is the Assistant Director for Transportation Strategic Planning of Miami-Dade Transit, providing services in Miami-Dade, Florida. Carlos, I'm now turning the session over to you.

Carlos Cruz-Casas:

Excellent. Thank you, Mr. Welbes. I often refer to the Department of Transportation and Public Works for Miami-Dade County as a mobility management agency, not just because it's a shorter name but also due more for the jobs than what we do. We do transit planning, transit operation, transit amenities, traffic highways, bridges, canals, signals, signs, bicycles, pedestrian, even the regulatory aspect for for-hire vehicles, taxis and limos, and back then before the state [inaudible] Uber and Lyft.

In terms of transit, we do provide regional and local service to all of Miami-Dade County-- from the Upper Keys in the South to Miami Gardens and Aventura on the North, from the Everglades on the West to Miami Beach and the Barrier Islands to the East.

Pre-COVID, we were running 99 bus routes while some local municipalities were running their own individual routes for a total over 160 routes running. We also have in our system a fully-elevated heavy-rail system as well as fully automated [inaudible] in downtown Miami.

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Now, there's no secret that ridership plummeted across the nation. Now, what appeared to be a secret and shouldn't have is the riders we had, the 20 percent that still remained riding transit were in fact keeping our city running. What the industry called transit-dependent were now essential and that everyone else is now transit-dependent. Our city would have come to a halt without transit. Another thing that we noticed, it was the fact that the elasticity was not the same across the entire network. The initial overall drop was down to about 20 percent of what we had before COVID, some routes were still running at about 40 percent demand. There was definitely a lot to learn during the last several months.

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The initial struggle was real. Our understanding of the health crisis was changing almost every day and so was our transit network. Immediately, we suspended for collection to allow for appropriate distancing between riders and operators, keeping our frontliners safe and we started to adjust services to match the demand.

Between the services, overlapping routes and express routes were the first ones to go. And just like that, like many others around the nation, we severely cut transit service during the beginning of the safer-at-home order to the tune of about 40 percent cut of the regular service.

Now unlike the trend, in Miami-Dade County we quickly restored to a full 100 percent of service for most of the routes and added supplemental services above and beyond what we had pre-COVID. We used real-time passenger load information to make decisions on a daily basis, added over 100 new buses from external resources. So now some of our routes have effective dead weight of about five minutes and we do so to manage the demand as we are limiting legal capacity. As was mentioned a little earlier, we are limiting the capacity to about 25 percent of what the crush load used to be.

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But adding vehicles is just not enough. We're adding, like I said, about 100 new buses out there, but we need to make them visible to the rider public. We introduced regular cutaway vehicles and tour buses. The tour bus that you typically take to a casino, an Everglades event or Miami Beach and some other place, they were out of business, so we got to our regular partners to turn those vehicles into transit vehicles.

On the right, you'll see while we work quickly with our partners were transit data to bring a lightweight AVL, automatic vehicle location equipment to the vehicle. With a regular tablet off the shelf and onboard application, we were able to assign vehicle to a run for tracking and track an EPA generation. That was an amazing opportunity for us, to make sure that we turned every vehicle out there, potentially into a transit vehicle. That was only for the additional services. What about the areas that were eliminated? Like many others, we had to eliminate services.

We eliminated nine overnight routes, but our city was still running. Our position is we didn't want to train people away from transit. So, immediately it turned into a creation of a voucher program with transit network companies and our third transit provider. To provide on-demand transit trips within a quarter mile of the alignment of those night routes and that was from midnight to 5 a.m. seven days a week. The Gold Nightly Program, as we named it, allows us to reallocate those resources to daytime while still providing trips to those in need the most.

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Further, we started looking at how we need to recover. We developed an internal approach for recovery. We're fortunate, and I say that out loud. We're fortunate that back in February, which looks like a lifetime ago, we had completed a full bus plan

called the Better Bus Project, a one of a kind partnership between Miami-Dade County and the local advocacy group called the Transit Alliance, and with the support of the talented professionals at Jarrett Walker and Associates. The Better Bus Network provided a much larger frequent grid for faster travel across much of Miami-Dade County.

Our recovery plan took into consideration the recommendations from the Better Bus Project as well as information from routes that we had pre-pandemic, and through the changes we had done, we looked to prioritize local trips over express services. We continue to monitor passenger loads and pass-ups at our stops and developed a plan taking into consideration all of the different aspects so we can get into recovery.

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One of the things we're able to do is to validate some -- the certain elements of the network were consistent pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. For example, we see that the top ten routes that we have running in our system carry more than 40 percent of our ridership. This is something that we took seriously for focusing on it.

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So not only we have recommendation from the Better Bus Project, but now we have a different understanding of the needs during the pandemic or a crisis. We regrouped with the Transit Alliance in the summertime and Jarrett Walker and Associates with new ridership pattern data in our collective learning from the current situation. There were minor changes to the Better Bus Project network that we created back in February but most importantly we developed a resiliency plan, a blueprint adjusted network in the event of unwanted economic stress. The resiliency plan introduces the concept of tiers of structure, allowing us to make appropriate decisions and changes to the system while still providing the core service. The resiliency plan is our attempt to become future-proofed with transit to the hope that we don't get fully implemented. But in the event that we have to go in that direction, we have a plan. For example, to the great extreme, Tier 1 out of say, Tier 4, we will be able to provide greater job access in today's network in more than 50 percent of the hypothetical reviews network. And that is just with cutting 35 percent of the services. Now we learned that more consistent headway through our data is more beneficial for transit riders than just basic service, and we need to focus on the full network of high frequency.

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One of the attempts that we're trying to do is trying to understand how we can incentivize travel patterns to help us manage the demand. With our partner Velocia, we are now able to use the mobile device platform to incentivize trips on the edges of the peak with a goal to help maximize the use of resources, and minimize the need for additional data during peak times for just a few trips.

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Lastly, but not the least, we also utilize the same platform to get a better understanding of what's important to the riders. We now have different solutions to improve safety but if the user doesn't feel comfortable or doesn't feel safe, what is the point? Through Velocia, we're now incentivizing riders to complete a daily survey to help us identify where we should target our enforcement as well as elevate the importance of understanding the sentiment from our riding public. Thank you.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Carlos, and thank you all for sharing your experiences with us. We will now have our speakers answer questions that were shared by the listening session audience in advance.

Our first question for the speakers is, which tools have your agencies found most effective for reaching out to riders and potential riders about their use of public transportation. Lauren, we'd like you to respond first.

Lauren Skiver:

Thank you. I think electronic format. I think we've always been using social media but that has also become -- we've been doing some Facebook Live sessions with our riders. I think that still getting out on the street -- we still do street teams, take all of the appropriate precautions and we hand out PPE. So, as we're talking with riders, if they don't have a face covering, we can give them one, have been extremely important in ensuring that our riders know that we're going to be here and that we're taking precautions.

I think using all of the technology -- I mean transit really is a technology company that does mobility. I think taking advantage of that, and also, we have been forced to actually use and understand our technology more deeply than I think we did before the pandemic. That's also been actually another silver lining from the pandemic. We're using more of the tools that we purchased over the years to help us communicate and we understand them better than we ever have.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Lauren. Steven, you're next.

Steven Richard:

I can definitely echo some of what Lauren said. We've done some of the distribution of PPE as well and that definitely provides a great opportunity to talk about the importance of the services we provide and how we've adapted it. Another thing we did, it just happened to work out that we had a program evaluation going on during the public health emergency and as a result, we had listening sessions that we held statewide in each county and gave people a chance to really weigh in. And we held a few of them at

different times of the day to catch a cross-section of different transit users. That was really a very effective tool.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Steven. Carlos?

Carlos Cruz-Casas:

Yeah. It's definitely communication is a challenge in a time that it is hard to be in front of people. So, of course, we're trying to maximize the social media and the digital formats. I would say that probably the best way to spread the word is to help keep your partners, your transit advocates, your groups, their participant cities and counties, everyone informed and hope for the hopes that you create a larger network of communication, social media was great but it was not enough.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Carlos. For our second question, please discuss whether your agencies have any insight from outreach to riders, local employers, community agencies, nonprofits and others about how transit demand may change in the coming years, as a result of the public health emergency. Russ, would you like to answer first, please?

Russ Stark:

Sure. I mean in any conversations with those types of folks, I think probably some of the obvious that all of you are hearing are coming up, particularly what changes are going to be made in the workplaces of office workers and those who have started working remotely almost exclusively over the last eight, nine months, and how many of those folks will be coming back to those office spaces once they are safely able to or not. Certainly anecdotally, a lot of our workplaces seem to be moving towards more flexibility in that direction and I personally would anticipate seeing a lower demand for riders among those who have enjoyed some of the ability to work from home, particularly those for whom kids would eventually be going back to school in person.

But I think for folks who are more transit-dependent or sort of on the being economically impacted by COVID and the recession, I think there's just so many unanswered questions about what the nature of their work opportunities are going to be in those transportation choices, which is thus what our targeted program is all about.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Russ. Steven, your turn.

Steven Richard:

I think this is really the million-dollar question that really all of Wall Street is looking at and what does a return to normal look like and how do people resume going back to the office and functioning like we used to. Some things I see on the horizon that will change, it looks like, probably permanently, and that's around a lot of health access. The use of telemedicine has increased dramatically. A lot of payers in the system are willing to pay for telemedicine visits now that didn't used to, so it's being more broadly accepted. In addition, behavioral and mental health access, more and more of this has been done with telemedicine and I think that that trend is likely to continue. And certainly people, telework is a major thing. I think all of those things are going to push down demand, but there is a possible offset that I see, and that's that I think there's a point at which a teleworker that lives in good proximity to transit services might be at that crossing point where a car doesn't make sense anymore. If I'm working in a hybrid arrangement where I have to be in the office one day a week, I can arrange transit or rideshare for that one day a week and it really doesn't make sense to have all the overhead of owning and operating a car. That could potentially be somewhat of an offset.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Steven. Your thoughts, Carlos.

Carlos Cruz-Casas:

I definitely agree with that. There's still a lot more to learn. The one thing I can tell you is it's going to be harder for people to project what they're going to be doing for the next month, the month ahead. We'll start seeing perhaps in more pay as they go for transit users and modern mobility solutions. At the same time, the telecommute and some of the other aspects with school changing, might start changing the need for peak services and perhaps attracting more consistent service throughout the entire day. We talked about the benefit to have people working from home, but at the same time what we've seen is people working from home, they take more trips during the middle of the day to do all of their other chores and do other aspects, so I think it's going to be more about leveling out the service in the off peak to make sure that we have a system that people can rely on.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Carlos. Lauren, you have the last word on this question.

Lauren Skiver:

Well I'm going to keep it simple. My staff hears me say this all of the time and I hope it's not provocative to the audience, but we have to stop selling what people aren't buying. That means reinventing ourselves, looking at the services we're providing and what the

community really needs, looking at where we're providing service and what trip generators have changed and adapting to that.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you. Our next question is, has your agency changed its mix of services, such as local versus express, fixed route versus demand response, et cetera, to address changing rider needs? And if yes, just please describe a bit more about that. Carlos, you want to start, please?

Carlos Cruz-Casas:

Yeah, Lauren, did an excellent job teeing up to this one. First, we have to change how we provide service. We eliminated express routes and we're focusing more on local routes, shorter trips and more consistent [inaudible] for the entire day. But at the same time, we also introduced an on-demand transit service with Via and our goal is to start identifying areas that we can continue to expand our on-demand transit to supplement fixed route services in order to meet the users where they need us.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Carlos. Lauren, you're next.

Lauren Skiver:

Well I've talked a little bit about redesigning and I think that sometimes internally we think about new things but we don't think about the things that we already do and what we know best. I think one of the things we've done is these flexible services, I mean we believe rideshare is going to be the way that in our community, we're somewhat rural with very little urbanized area, will be the new way that we move people to faster trunk services. But remember, that's just a circulator service from 15 years ago. It's not a new thing; it's using a new tool to do an old thing we know exactly how to do. I think what we've been encouraging our teams to think about is you don't have to think of something new, you might need to think of a way to do it better and more effectively for our riders, and we've been concentrating on that in our redesign.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you. Good points all. Our next question is for you, Steven. Please discuss what you've learned about how the COVID-19 public health emergency has affected transit travel choices made by riders with disabilities.

Steven Richard:

Okay. Well, one thing we definitely noticed is that there's a different elasticity of demand for transit-dependent and people with disability. Our wheelchair dependent

riders normally make up 5 percent of our transportation demand, and that has been 8 percent. While everything else has trended down, rides by certainly wheelchair bound people have not as much, and I think the good reason for that is we are really the only transportation alternative so many of them have.

I think it's challenging for them because certainly a lot of people who are wheelchair-bound have health conditions that are challenging, especially with COVID. They're probably more concerned than your average rider and feeling like they're taken hostage on needing to ride with us. That fact being what it is and the trending, again, we have an aging population, more medical and dialysis population, I see those trends continue upward. We just need to find a way to deliver that service in as solid a way as we can.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Steven. Will, we'll start with you for our final question. Do you see a post COVID-19 scenario or future where transit agencies will act more as total transportation solutions for ridesharing, on-demand services, micro transit and other types of services?

Will Schroeer:

I absolutely do. I think a couple of the previous speakers have already touched on some important aspects here. We're committed -- and I know everyone on this call is committed to high-quality service to as many places and for as many people as possible, but we're never going to be able to get everywhere all of the time with the right high-quality service. There are other ways to provide those needed services, and yeah, some of them are old ideas being deployed in a new way, some of them are new ideas. But transit agencies can be, should be, and I think will be at the center of providing those total transportation solutions.

A little shout out to Metro Transit here in the region which made their Go-To cards, their stored value card, able to also function as the radio frequency ID card that opens an HOURCAR, so you can use one card for both services and really starting to link those two kinds of services. I know that's an idea that is being worked on elsewhere as well, but I think they were the first ones to do it in the country, and I know they're committed to continuing that kind of multi-modal all kinds of modes approach to service.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Will. Carlos, your turn.

Carlos Cruz-Casas:

Definitely. The one thing I will start with is transit is the ultimate rideshare system. Starting from that, I do agree. I think that the transition becomes the core and center of the mobility ecosystem but acts more as a mobility facilitator than just mobility provider. It's on-demand services, micro transit, micro mobility, all of that needs to be anchored around transit. Some people have said transit is not for me, and I'll leave you with this: I

think it definitely is for everyone. It might not be for every trip but it's for everyone. If we start thinking about it that way, we'll be able to open our doors to better mobility and always supporting transit.

Matt Welbes:

Much appreciated. Thank you, Carlos. Lauren, we'll conclude with your response.

Lauren Skiver:

I've talked a lot about it. I think that looking into the future should be something that we are glad to do. I mean we all want to leave 2020 behind and start looking at what does the new paradigm look like for transit. I think we should all be hopeful and we should all be thankful. Our three continued rolling. Our operators came to work, our employees, our technicians all made it happen. I think we should spend 2021 thanking them and ensuring that we're hopeful for what's going to happen in our service networks and what we're going to do to attract riders back and to reinvent ourselves, and I'll leave it with that.

Matt Welbes:

Thank you, Lauren, and thank you to each one of you for your time today in sharing how your agencies are making service adaptations to address the changes in rider needs right now during COVID-19 efforts.

We at FTA, we really look forward to supporting you in any way we can as the country addresses this public health emergency and we all take actions that support a return to normal.

With that, I'm going to turn it back over to Jane to close out today's session.

Jane Williams:

Thank you, Matt and Henrika, and thank you to each of our panelists for taking the time to share your experiences with us. We certainly benefited from discussing our shared experiences and successes.

Let me again say thank you on behalf of the Administration and the Department for all you are doing to keep America and Americans moving.

I hope everyone has a wonderful holiday and we look forward to supporting the work you do in the New Year. Thank you, everyone.