

COVID-19 Tribal Transit Manager Peer Roundtable II – Summary

April 9, 2020

Below are questions, experiences, and comments from Roundtable participants organized by question.

Q: How has the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) affected your communities and your ability to deliver services? How many have had to suspend services? Who is still providing lifeline services like dialysis and or access to food?

A: The Mississippi (MS) Band of Choctaw Indians has experienced reduced services and as a result have had to furlough some of their drivers. For those drivers still operating, they need more Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and the Tribe is wondering if it is okay to pay those drivers Hazard Pay. For medical transportation capacity, vehicles not in use are being repurposed to deliver food to an expanded service area. Elders needing services in seven communities are not usual passengers, but they have asked for help accessing food.

Red Lake Transit in Red Lake Minnesota (MN), has had their services shut down for the last three weeks. Their Tribal Chairman has instituted both a “Stay at Home” policy and a recent “[Medical Martial Law](https://www.redlakenation.org/executive-order-medical-martial-law-will-be-in-effect-friday-april-3-2020-at-500-pm/),” available at <https://www.redlakenation.org/executive-order-medical-martial-law-will-be-in-effect-friday-april-3-2020-at-500-pm/>, on the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indian Tribal Reservation.

Q: Addressed to the representative from Red Lake, MN- What does “Medical Martial Law” mean? How long do you think this is going to last?

A: Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Tribal Chairman has issued a patrol at the border of the Tribal Reservations. Non-residents from surrounding towns are turned back and prevented from entering tribal lands. When issued, the Medical Martial Law was intended to last for 15 days. After that period, the Chairman will reassess the situation. Currently there are zero COVID-19 cases on the reservation of 5,000-6,000 residents.

Q: Also addressed to the representative from Red Lake, MN - Are people able to get medical care and access to food? Are services being provided to elders? Are food deliveries being made to elderly population?

A: Red Lake has a “Meals on Wheels” tribal program that will deliver food to the homebound. They also have an agreement with Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and pharmacies that allows tribal members to access their medical care and their medications.

A representative of the Northern Arizona Council of Governments, which represents four tribes in Northern Arizona - including the Hopi, Navajo, and Yavapai Apache tribes in Coconino county -

stated that all four transit agencies in his area are not operating services. They are trying to prepare for opportunities to re-open.

Q: For the Hopi, emergency services were last providing medical transportation - do you know how any of the four Tribes are responding to medical and food access?

A: A lot of the Section 5310 providers on those reservations are satisfying a lot of the medical transportation which has been scaled down to mean dialysis. The primary focus is on making sure that dialysis needs are taken care of. Any other transports are being taken care of outside the 5310/5311 network.

The participant was unaware of any grocery and shopping trips, or food deliveries.

As of a few days ago, the Hopi had not had any cases of COVID-19. The Navajo, however, have been seriously impacted by incidents of COVID-19. Navajo Transit shut down operations three weeks ago and a lot of their staff is being deployed to incident response in other areas throughout the Navajo Nation.

The Sitka Tribe of Alaska had a Stay at Home in place order from the Governor. Violators of the order could be issued a fine up to \$25,000. There is also a municipal order and a 5:00 PM curfew in place. Most people are complying with these orders. The Tribe suspended transit fixed route operations, on March 23, 2020, until the Stay at Home orders are lifted. People are finding alternative forms of transportation. Because most people are sheltering in place, those who need transportation from public transit are able to get it. In terms of medical trips - medical providers have offered their patients rides to and from medical appointments. Elective surgeries and dental appointments have been cancelled until further notice. Transit providers have switched their service from medical patients to employees that need transportation to and from work. Grocery workers have found alternative transportation forms.

At this stage, the Sitka transit agency would like to make sure that the employees and bus drivers can get paid during the furlough. They have all of their employees on payroll so far. Looking ahead into May, they hope to keep employees covered in these unusual and discomfoting times.

Q: Has your Tribe declared an emergency?

A: A number of Tribes in Alaska have declared an emergency.

Q: Has your Tribe reached out to FEMA, or any other external emergency management program?

A: The Mississippi Band of the Choctaw Indians has reached out to FEMA. In addition, the transit agency is working with regional emergency management organizations in surrounding counties.

Q: How will these changes be reflected in the short, medium, and long-term outlook?

A: The problem with this crisis is that there is no real timeframe for recovery - agencies are working on adopting best practices that fit the situation.

Q: Has anyone had issues finding or getting Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies for their drivers?

A: Because the Sitka Tribe has suspended their operations, PPE isn't something that they have ordered. In terms of cleaning supplies, they are on hold for when supplies are available at different retailers.

Q: During this emergency, can Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) dollars or other funding be used for other services that minimize the exposure of elders?

A: An attendee provided an example of rural transit agencies in New Jersey (NJ), which have changed services so that their drivers are picking up medicine and food and delivering it. They mostly leave the deliveries on porches. Elderly clients are able to get the lifeline services they need.

Q: Under the CARES Act, is it considered "Hazard Pay" for drivers putting themselves at risk of contracting COVID-19 by providing service to potentially sick riders?

A: This is a Federal Transit Administration (FTA) question. The National Rural Transit Assistance Program (National RTAP) will pose the question and wait for answers. Further information will be provided once FTA has answered this question.

More Protective Personal Equipment (PPE) for drivers is needed during this emergency. A participant answered that if "Hazard Pay" is an incremental cost beyond a driver's or any operator's normal salary it may be eligible under the CARES Act.

Another participant provided an example of a transit agency that increased the drivers' pay by \$2.00 an hour for those driving during the crisis.

Essentially how each agency pays its drivers and the individual cost to each driver making the choice to work is a case-by-case negotiation based on each agency's resources. The difficulty lies in the unknowns of COVID-19 and the lack of a timeline - there is no foreseeable end to this crisis.

Q: Regarding a specific case of a dialysis center that has been designated a "COVID-19 Center" one participant asked: Is the dialysis treatment center zone larger than the normal service area for dialysis patients? Are the dialysis COVID-19 patients coming from a longer distance than dialysis patients would normally be coming from?

A: In Mississippi (MS), one agency provides services to a dialysis center that has been designated a "COVID-19 Center." Any person receiving dialysis that has tested positive for COVID-19 is sent to this location. During the day, normal dialysis treatment is available for those who are not ill. After 5:00 PM, COVID-19 positive patients are treated. Then the entire building is sanitized and cleaned so that it is sterile for the next day. A participant worried that despite efforts to follow best practices (temperature testing and cleaning) drivers will come into contact with COVID-19 and become ill from these interactions.

These COVID-19 positive dialysis patients are coming from a longer distance in surrounding rural counties, so there aren't large numbers of cases. There are three counties around the city of Jackson, MS that are designated Hot Spots. This agency attempted to negotiate with health centers so that they can avoid going into the city of Jackson, MS so as to avoid an increased threat of exposure for their drivers. Overall, there has been a decrease of medical trips as health centers have been using telemedicine to avoid unnecessary trips.

Q: How easy is it for you to get COVID-19 tests? Is it different for those with severe symptoms versus those that are asymptotic?

A: There are no readily available tests in Mississippi. There are COVID-19 hotlines. If you have symptoms that warrant a higher level of care, the doctors will tell the patient to come to health center.

Q: Have any of you that are providing services done any modifications on your vehicles to protect your drivers?

A: When the shelter in place orders are lifted for the Sitka tribe and they restart services, it will be important that protective shields are installed. The participant stated that it was to his understanding that those sorts of things would be covered under COVID-19 grants. In the long-term- post-crisis - it will be important to have these protections (specifically protective shields) for drivers in place.

Some Tribes will be receiving enough money that they will look at purchasing new vehicles with more flexible arrangements. The issue of delivering food and medication to people will continue to be an important role - not just delivering people to food and medication.

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians believe that it would be tough to have shields put in for the drivers because they have encountered problems with the supply chain. Vendors are not able to distribute goods to the area because of COVID-19 delivery restrictions. Additionally, mechanics are off-duty, so there is no one to install additional protections. They will not be able to get shields installed for drivers in time during this crisis.

National RTAP may be creating a video about the installation of protective shields on a bus. Perhaps this kind of technical assistance would allow some of the more remote areas be able to have mechanics install protective shielding using easily accessible materials. This would circumvent the wait for vendors to provide delivery and installation services.

A lot of solutions may be homegrown. Some of the grocery stores have fashioned pieces of plexiglass between the register and the customer. Plexiglass is something that can be bought off-the-shelf. They manufactured the shielding on their own.

For the future, when ordering vehicles, it will be important to keep some kind of driver protective shielding equipment in mind.

Q: With protective shielding being a new necessity, will this alter the schematics for buses? Specifically- if you have to procure through State Departments of Transportation (DOTs) - would this modification for driver protection be possible when ordering buses from state specs? Would agencies have to make modifications at their own cost, as usual, or would it be included in the 80/20 match rate?

A: The answer to this question is dependent on individual State DOT.

The state developed the specs and if purchasing off a state contract it would seem like they may be willing to make the change in terms of standard specifications.

National RTAP is working with the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Multi-State Transit Technical Assistance Program (MTAP) on the topic of vehicle specifications - it will be interesting to see what State DOTs are doing next. We will also work on getting some information on what modifications people are currently installing. If trying to look at after-market modification - at this point changes that are not damaging the integrity of the vehicle and that increase driver safety would be supported by the CARES Act COVID-19 funding.

On Wednesday May 13, 2020, from 2:00 PM-3:00 PM EDT, National RTAP and MTAP will co-host a [Vehicle Specifications Webinar](#) with Carlton Allen, the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) Florida Department of Transportation's (FDOT's) Transit Research Inspection Procurement Services (TRIPS) Program Manager. FDOT's Assistant State Transit Manager, Robert Westbrook, will moderate this session. If you are interested in attending this webinar to learn more about vehicle specifications, please register at:

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/1954178914318941708>.

A member of the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) mentioned that there was a [Rural Transit Manager's COVID-19 Roundtable](#) posted on their website at <https://ctaa.org/covid-19-resources/> that may have best practices for rural transit managers.

Q: Will there be a Tribal Transit Peer Roundtable Weekly?

A: As things are rapidly changing, National RTAP is open to providing a forum for people to talk about what they are doing, how they are sorting priorities, and responding in the short-term, mid-term, and long-term. Perhaps every 2 weeks.

Additionally, National RTAP has weekly phone calls with FTA regarding the COVID-19 crisis.

In between meetings, National RTAP's "[Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\): Information and Resources for Transit](#)," available at <http://nationalrtap.org/Resource-Library/Advanced-Search/?id=1082>, is constantly updated. It can be used to reference the most up-to-date information. National RTAP is writing a Best Practices Spotlight article with case studies that detail different scenarios across the country. It is helpful for National RTAP and FTA to understand how they can help transit agencies use their resources to support the various needs in communities. Keeping this feedback loop going can make sure that the resources that come through the federal government and FTA are continuously available and relevant to transit agencies. National RTAP is willing and able to provide a peer forum for discussing needs.

Q: Congress is in the midst of reworking the next Congressional Transportation Bill - has Congress put together a transit piece to this?

A: At this point in time, National RTAP does not have a definitive answer to this question. We will refer the question to FTA and update the answer with their input.

The participant who asked this question thought it would be helpful for FTA and Tribes, and Tribal transit agencies, to work hand in hand in providing Congress with the input on this issue.

The Intertribal Transportation Association (ITA) submitted a transit bill and Congress welcomed the input. CTAA has been tracking this development and providing lawmakers with input.

A representative from CTAA answered that the association had submitted recommendations for reauthorization. However, with the COVID-19 crisis, reauthorization was put on the back-burner. But now, it has been brought to the front-burner since some representatives of Congress are viewing the infrastructure package as an integral part of economic recovery. Investing money in infrastructure should help bring the economy back. It's possible that the size of the reauthorization or the infrastructure package will be larger than we may have anticipated three months ago. A lot of options are on the table and are all very much in flux. Background discussions are taking place; we will hear more about it in a few weeks.

A participant brought up the Tribal "discretionary" proposed funding of \$45 million. Even with the COVID-19 doubling of the usual discretionary amounts; there remains a lot of unmet needs that Tribal programs have just not had the resources to respond to. They are still in a phase of trying to figure out (post-initial outbreak) what their programs will look like going forward. The broadband access piece has been a part of many of the responses that National RTAP has heard from people who are inside and outside of the transportation environment. It is absolutely necessary to respond to what's going on with rural and Tribal programs and communities that need access. At this point this is difficult to provide. The broadband data piece, which enables people to have the ability to communicate, is even more important in these uncertain times.

The attendee who asked this question would like to keep this item as an ongoing discussion topic. The main point he was trying to raise was that FTA and Tribes, along with CTAA, should try and coordinate their efforts and communications with Congress about pressing needs. The increase of funds is a recognition of the present pandemic need, but it isn't enough. Regarding the broadband data and access portion, that kind of communication element is a challenge for Tribal transit. In the previous two grants that the Sitka Tribe received, they were funded to purchase two new buses. Before that funding, they had been operating dated, obsolete buses. One of their objectives is to add a communication element in their purchase of new vehicles, but this technology is not available. The cutaway buses purchased faced the additional challenge of operating on a remote Alaskan Island. Keeping these challenges in mind, it would be helpful for FTA and Tribes to coordinate and communicate, appropriately, with Congress about these specific needs. Tribes need to respect FTA's requirement of not lobbying Congressional delegates. However, the participant suggested that Tribes and FTA work within the guidelines to reach a common understanding of what information and needs are to be relayed to Congress.

National RTAP has been working at the federal level with other agency partners, like the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), that are engaged with Tribal and rural organizations. They both have data implementation programs, so maybe National RTAP can work with our existing partners to invite grantees to speak about their programs. FTA is very interested and sees this as a high priority. Broadband communication access is essential for being able to use FTA grant resources and also to engage communities.

Q: Can CTAA offer more to Tribal transit groups to increase Tribal membership?

A: A participant from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians suggested that Tribal transit only meets every two years, but felt that CTAA could make sure that Tribal interests are represented yearly. A number of Tribes send employees to the EXPO for training, but they specifically need

tribal transit related curricula. Some Tribes are not members of CTAA, and not many Tribal participants attend overall events. In the Southeast, there is a small number of CTAA Tribal members in comparison to all other entities out there. The attendee has recently become acquainted with the South West Transit Association (SWTA) and realized that this regional association has a very strong tribal program. This attendee asserted that he would bypass CTAA's 2020 Community Transportation EXPO for an opportunity to attend SWTA's tribal training program. Some of the problems that Tribes in the Southeast face are similar to those that the tribal groups in the SWTA alliance face. Therefore, it is easier to relate to their peers in the southwest than at CTAA. It would be good to have more Tribal transit courses at CTAA. As a result of tribal interests being represented, more tribes may join CTAA.

A representative from CTAA offered the following response: there is strength in numbers. A lot of the advocacy that CTAA does on Capitol Hill would be reinforced if the group could show Congress that they had the support of many Tribes. SWTA represents transit programs in 11 states and their new Executive Director, Rich Sampson, used to be CTAA's Communications Director. CTAA's EXPO was originally scheduled to take place in May 2020 in Louisville, KY. However, it has been postponed until November 2020. At the EXPO they hold a two-day Tribal Symposium every three years whenever the conference takes place in the West. They last held it in 2019 in Palm Springs, CA. CTAA does something Tribal-related every year and will continue outreach to represent the interest of Tribal and non-members alike.

In working with Amy Fong, FTA Tribal Transit Program Manager, National RTAP has found a need for more intentional development of capacity around Tribal transit training. This need exists within Tribes and within Tribal transit agencies. Robin Phillips, Executive Director of National RTAP, spoke with Rich Sampson, the Executive Director of SWTA, at the 2020 SWTA conference. Together, they explored the idea of using existing National RTAP courses alongside its upcoming Tribal Transit Toolkit to develop a curriculum accessible at all conferences to support tribes.

There is a dual need for both representation of Tribal transit specific challenges, and, for training that builds capacity at the individual program level.

Q: Is there anything else people would like to add before we go?

A: National RTAP looks forward to continuing this discussion and will reach out to FTA and others regarding an upcoming Tribal Transit Manager Peer Roundtable.

We would like to thank all the participants and look forward to helping tribal communities with next steps during this pandemic.