



COVID-19 Transit Manager Panel Discussion Summary

April 15, 2020, 2:00-3:00 PM Eastern

Panelists:

- **Julia Castillo**, Executive Director, Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Authority (HIRTA), Urbandale, IA
- **Tim Geibel**, Executive Director, Crawford Area Transit Authority (CATA), Meadville, PA
- **Angie Jones**, District Manager, Grant County Transportation District (People Mover), John Day, OR
- **Sharon Peeler**, CCTM, Executive Director, JTrans, Marianna, FL
- **Connie Sipe**, Transit Program Administrator, Center for Community, Sitka, AK
- **George Levitsky**, CCTM, General Manager, Fairmont-Marion County Transit Authority (FMCTA), Fairmont, WV

How has your agency responded to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. service changes, staff and passenger protections, cleaning procedures, staff compensation, etc.)?

Julia Castillo. There has no reduction in demand-response or Paratransit services. However, ridership is down. They are still taking people to work, medical appointments, grocery shopping and also to critical life sustaining needs such as dialysis. They have also added food and meal deliveries to shut-ins, which is being paid out of Aging Emergency funds. They have eliminated fares.

HIRTA is requiring drivers and passengers to wear masks. If the passenger doesn't have a mask, they are given a bandana to use. HIRTA staff are using masks from their Bloodborne Pathogens kits. The kits have been reordered. Homemade masks were also donated. Buses are being cleaned more frequently.

They are discussing with their Board the possibility of providing a pay raise or bonus for those who worked during this crisis. Several Iowa agencies are paying time and half as a hazard pay.

HIRTA has a new Pandemic Policy which addresses hazard pay. The policy is posted on the National RTAP website: http://nationalrtap.org/Portals/0/HIRTA_Pandemic_Plan_2020.pdf.

They have increased outreach activities including doing outreach calls to seniors who are not currently riding. This allows them to check on them. It is also good for trip schedulers as they miss

that interaction. Most importantly, it helps to identify if needs not being met and if a referral to Aging Resources is needed. These calls let them know HIRTA is still here and hopefully makes it easier to transition back to riding knowing HIRTA is a trusted resource who cares.

Tim Geibel. Unfortunately, there has been a 70 percent reduction in services with the need for Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) reduced. For their fixed routes, they are using their Saturday schedule on weekdays. However, they have not scaled back paratransit services and are using paratransit for riders impacted by reduced weekday service on fixed routes. This includes essential employees who use transit to travel to work. They are also using paratransit to provide round-trips for seniors to go to the senior center and pick up meals.

CATA has a well-thought-out approach to managing employees. To ensure that essential office and dispatch employees could work from home, Internet service was purchased for some individuals. Layoffs have been limited as hours per employee have been reduced across the board. They have offered layoffs and have reduced hours in order to keep as many employees as possible. They are doing the best they can to maintain benefits. In an effort to provide hours to drivers they are staying flexible. For example, their own employees are doing office cleaning.

They are staying in contact with elected officials, PennDOT and are continuously in communication with their Board. This is very important for future funding. Operation staff is starting to develop a plan for reopening.

Stay in touch with other transit agencies in your state. Help out when you can.

Angie Jones. While all of People Mover services are running on the same schedule, demand has plummeted. Ridership has dropped on all services including intercommunity, intown deviated routes and demand-response. Intercity connectors have been the hardest hit, with little to no ridership. The District has kept these services running because they are the only public transit connection for the county to rest of the state. Local demand response and deviated routes are being used primarily for essential trips. Trips to and from food banks (only once a month) and grocery stores have been added. At the food bank, the driver loads up the bus with food and then delivers it to people.

Drivers are receiving hazard pay (an extra \$2 an hour) which will extend through the state's stay at home order. They have not had any layoffs yet, but hours have been reduced.

Drivers are required to wear masks and also wear gloves when assisting with mobility devices and equipment. It is recommended that passengers also wear masks. They have solicited donations for homemade masks. They bought 240 surgical surplus masks from the local Army Surplus store. Masks were individually wrapped and given out to passengers if they didn't have one.

They only allow four passengers at a time on their 12-seat buses. They are cleaning, disinfecting and sanitizing buses every day. They disinfect high touch surfaces throughout the day, typically every hour. Disinfectant wipes have been extremely hard to purchase, so they have begun making their own using washable cloths (cut up tea towels, sheets and regular towels) and disinfectant solution (2 cups alcohol, 1 tsp. soap and 25 drops lemon oil). They have ordered handheld UV Sanitizing units and PPE to safely use the equipment. Once mobile units become available, they will order one of those as well.

She has maintained contact with her local Health Department and Emergency Operations Center to stay in the loop about what is happening in our community, update them on what we are doing, and stay informed of current CDC and Oregon Health Authority recommendations or requirements.

George Levitsky. Ridership is down in Fairmont, West Virginia. Their main transfer station has been closed and daily ridership is down from approximately 800 to 100. They have shut down 14 regular routes (M-F) and two Saturday routes. They are operating Monday – Friday and continue to take regular passengers to and from work, dialysis, and other essential services as can be accommodated. People who come into the office (to request a ride) are allowed in one at a time by buzzer to talk to the dispatcher. The dispatcher screens the passengers by asking if they are sick, have a fever, have been tested, had contact with test positive people, or have been in quarantine. If appropriate, they will refuse the passenger and refer them to their Rescue Squad.

Driver protection is taken seriously. All are asked to wear some sort of face guard. A shower curtain separates them from passengers. They have also removed the seat behind the driver. They are disinfecting buses and office areas as often as possible. Passengers are also requested to wear a mask.

They are maintaining pay as much as they can. Ten drivers work every other day, 8 part-time don't want to work, and 2 continue to work part-time in the transfer station. They are providing some rewards in the form of free meals.

Sharon Peeler. Ridership is down from approximately 200 per day to 40 per day. They only provide essential trips. Cuts in drivers and staff have occurred. Full-time staff are compensated for hours not worked, so they don't need to use vacation time. Drivers and cleaners are getting hazard pay.

All drivers are asked, but not required, to wear some sort of face guard. Older drivers or those with conditions are not required to work. Passengers are not allowed to sit in the seat behind the driver and are asked to spread-out on the bus. Fare collection is through cash in an envelope. Requiring NEMT passengers to sign a tablet has been discontinued. The buses are cleaned after each shift by the drivers and are deep cleaned the following day. However, they need materials and it is difficult to find.

Passengers are also requested to wear masks; however, masks are hard to get. Some homemade masks are being donated. Both drivers and passengers are screened through a series of questions. They will not transport passengers who have been exposed or are showing symptoms.

Connie Sipe. Sitka is very small town (pop. 9000) and is on an island in Alaska. All services were discontinued as of March 22, 2020. Four out of their five drivers are high risk and three refused to drive. Their maintenance vendor will not work. They were unsuccessful in getting masks and the cleaning materials are gone. They went fare-free as soon as possible. It was also difficult to practice social distancing in 16-seat and 24-seat vehicles.

They are very concerned that fish processing workers are due to arrive in late April or early May. Fish processing has been deemed an essential business. A plan was submitted to the state and includes provisions including only taking people from Mexico or who have self-quarantined for 14 days before traveling (by plane and ferry) to Sitka, Alaska. The town is very concerned and expects that the virus peak has not happened yet.

How does your agency plan to use the CARES Act funding?

Julia Castillo. HIRTA plans on using the funding for operating expenses and losses due to COVID-19 occurring now and also extending into the future. It is unknown what impact this will have on our system in the months to come.

Tim Geibel. Tim suggests keeping good records and tracking all COVID-19 expenses. CATA hopes that there will be funding for more long-term losses and stabilizing services. They are expecting at least 8 to 12 months to get back to normal. They are making PennDOT aware of these long-term issues.

Angie Jones. They will use the funds to replace loss revenue and for grant matching. NEMT trip revenue is down to almost \$0, and that revenue was used for local matches. In Oregon, CARES Act funding has been rolled out quickly and in three stages. Grant applications are due soon.

George Levitsky. They plan on using funding for local match requirements.

Sharon Peeler. They are not sure yet. They have other funds for paying drivers when they can't work. An FTA loan (8-week period) will not need to be paid back, and they will use these funds for paying driver salaries when they are not working.

Connie Sipe. Alaska DOT has applied for CARES Act funding. They are not sure how they can use the funding to pay furloughed employees.

How is your agency handling short- and long-term budgeting?

Julia Castillo. In the short term, HIRTA is paying fixed cost expenses like rent, utilities, etc. They are also successfully negotiated with Workers Comp and their auto insurance carrier to reduce costs due to the reduction in employees and number of vehicles being used. They have placed a hold on all services used within the office such as shredding, water delivery, etc.

HIRTA is also using this time to rewrite their business plan that will allow them to be more sustainable when services begin to ramp up again. This includes reviewing all job descriptions/positions to determine who will be brought back and what their job will look like when they return. As horrible as this crisis is, it is an opportunity for us to become more efficient in our operations, and gives us time to review policies, and update procedures, which is a luxury of time we don't often have.

Long-term goals are to promote how vital and essential we are in the community, and all the things we did to step up! Also, it is so important to keep the public updated, continue social media posts, website updates, newspaper interviews, and even with legislative sessions on hold, reach out to local officials. Work with your local Volunteer Center on ways transit can help with food pantries, deliveries, etc. Keep your public transit system alive even if you are not doing trips or are providing limited trips. This is not the time to be forgotten!

Tim Geibel. They need to prepare for long term impact of pandemic.

Angie Jones. Budget committee meetings will be virtual and obtaining public comments is challenging.

George Levitsky. The low price of fuel is helpful.