Rural Transit Heroes Twitter Chat
October 20, 2020

Summary

On October 20, 2020, National RTAP hosted a #RuralTransitHeroes Twitter chat moderated by Kari Banta of TXDOT and Julia Castillo of Heart of Iowa Regional Transportation Authority (HIRTA). We all need heroes and there’s no better place to look than among our own, to talk about people in transit who responded in a time of need. No deed is too small if it made a difference!

Over 85 individuals and organizations attended the chat, which received over 7,600 impressions on October 20, 2020. Some of the Rural Transit Heroes in attendance included: Arizona Transit Association, BOOs Rapid Transit, Council on Tall Buildings & Urban Habitat Amherst, Flint Hills aTa Bus, Flint Hills Region, HIRTA Public Transit, Johnson County Government, Human Transit book author Jarrett Walker, NORC Walsh Center, Ohio Valley Regional Development Commission, Rail Magazine, River Cities Public Transit, Shared Use Mobility Center, T-Rail, Texas DOT, Transportation for America, Tri County Economic Development District, Utah RPA, Utah Transit Authority, and Via Mobility Services.

Visit the chat transcript for questions asked during the chat and attendees’ replies, as well as every photo received for the 2020 National RTAP Rural Transit Heroes Photo Contest. We have also provided answers to questions received during and after the chat below. As Julia declared during the chat, “I think Bus Operator uniforms need to include capes!”

**Question 1:** Who most inspired your interest in transit? Tell us about them!

**Answers:**

- Liv Stecker from Tri County Economic Development District greeted everyone in the chat with, "Hi from Colville, WA!" Connie Mahugh from Rural Resources Community Action is a tenacious pioneer in rural transit who pushes through all kinds of obstacles in our region and makes things happen. She’s been an inspiration to me. My predecessor Silas Rappe is another hero.

- “Bob the Bus Driver” was National RTAP Resource Center Manager Cara Marcus’ daughter’s school bus driver. He was an artist who displayed his amazing work on the bus. At the end of the year, he painted a congratulations sign with everyone’s names that made them feel really special. Texas Department of Transportation Program Manager Kari Banta commented, “That’s incredibly sweet. Wonder how many other people he inspired!” A rider
chimed in about how he rode the city bus to and from school for many years growing up in my isolated, sub-100k population town.

- The NORC Walsh Center is inspired by the many programs and agencies that have implemented innovative and promising models to improve the availability of transportation for rural communities. They invite everyone to check out the Rural Transportation Toolkit.
- Flint Hills Area Transportation Agency inspired Michael Wilson to want to make a difference in the community and help people have equal access to everyday life. He is very proud to be a part of an organization so willing to help people in need.
- Some people don't realize just how important the transportation field is. “I love doing what I do because we help people and really make an impact on peoples' lives,” shares HIRTA Public Transit Executive Director Julia Castillo.

**Question 2:** What’s the most heroic thing you’ve seen on rural transit?

**Answer:**

- A BC Transit driver worked with a passenger to **extinguish an out-of-control brush fire**. The driver and the passenger are both Rural Transit Heroes.
- During a flood in 2018 the Flint Hills Region transit system helped relocate people to shelters and hotels. They worked quickly and without question. HIRTA had to do the same a few years back during a flood too.
- HIRTA's drivers have been especially heroic by working during the pandemic. Not knowing if they are exposed or not, they continued to service and assist. Everyone at HIRTA Public Transit is so proud of all of HIRTA's Heroes. HIRTA received grants funds to do Assurance Calls so they can check on all the seniors not currently riding & connect them to other services they may need. It has been great for our staff and those riders! Every little thing helps in keeping people connected.
- Kari saw a driver rush in to help a passenger who fainted from low blood sugar. The driver knew the passenger was diabetic and was so calm and professional about it. She was amazed how quickly it all happened.
- Rural transportation programs make a difference in the daily lives of people across the U.S. Transportation programs, such as those highlighted in the NORC Walsh Center Rural Transportation Toolkit, are heroes to the people who they serve.
- A driver on one of the Spokane Tribe's Moccasin Express routes took care of riders like they were family. He checked in for health updates, delivered groceries, no task too small or weird for him.

**Question 3:** Is there someone behind the scenes that you’d like to recognize as an unsung hero?

**Answers:**

- Volunteer drivers are unsung rural heroes. There are also some considerations related to rural volunteer transportation models described in the NORC Walsh Center’s Rural Transportation Toolkit. Volunteer drivers are truly amazing people!
- Michael thinks that dispatchers and travel trainers are the unsung heroes.
- HIRTA Public Transit is so proud of every single HIRTA team member, but Julia has to give a special shout out to Amber and their customer service team. They have been so great with facing new daily challenges, staying up-to-date with evolving policies and so much
more! Kari chimed in with, “Customer service staff have especially had to roll with the punches. Thank you Amber and team!”

- Kathy, National RTAP’s amazing Resource Center Assistant, deserves a shout-out for setting up almost 60 tweets about the Rural Transit Heroes submitted to our 2020 Photo Contest, so there is a new tweet every minute during this Twitter Chat.
- Every single person who worked through the beginning of COVID-19 doing whatever was needed to ensure people were served safely from a Pandemic we didn't understand!
- Collville, WA is served by a small army of volunteer dial-a-ride drivers. Most people have no idea who these everyday heroes are.
- Kari adds that it's good to remember the staff at the office and behind the phones as heroes too!

**Question 4:** How can transit agencies recognize and commend their heroes?

**Answers:**

- Transit agencies should celebrate the great work of rural transit programs.
- Michael said that random gift cards are always nice. Additional paid days off are a hit as well.
- HIRTA Public Transit made HIRTA HERO shirts for our drivers, provided Hero pay & send weekly encouragement and thank you messages to their tablets. They also incorporated a tab on their website and social medias where their riders can thank a HIRTA hero! At HIRTA, they randomly hide little notes sometimes during pre-inspection that when employees find, they can turn in for a gift card. HIRTA also made signs for all their buses so the public knows who are the real heroes are!
- Get an article about your Rural Transit Heroes in the local newspaper, like this one about Benzie Bus hero Scott Powell in LMT News.
- The NORC Walsh Center welcomes the opportunity to highlight the work of promising programs in the Rural Transportation Toolkit.
- The National RTAP Transit Manager’s Toolkit has a section on Keeping Drivers on Board. Some tips: give thank-you gift cards, celebrate special milestones, and surprise your heroes with pizza lunches.

**Question 5:** Acts of heroism don’t have to be large. What are some of the small things we can do to make a big difference in our riders’ lives?

**Answers:**

- Rural Transit Heroes are keeping passengers safe. For Flint Hills riders, they placed COVID safety kits on our buses to include a cloth mask, hand sanitizer, and CDC information. This small gesture shows that they care. Kari replied, “That's more than a small gesture! How thoughtful of your system to do that.”
- Julia provided the following recommendations: Wearing masks and encouraging the rides to do the same to keep everyone safe. Having masks on the bus to hand to those who don’t have one. Communication is key to let the public know what we are doing and what they can expect!
- Transportation is more than just a ride. We can make a difference by volunteering to drive a family member, such as an older adult, who needs a ride to the doctor’s office or grocery
store. Transportation is critical for aging in place. The NORC Walsh Center Rural Aging in Place toolkit has more information.

- Volunteers who help out with rides are doubly Rural Transit Heroes. Transit agencies should consider them a vital part of the team. National RTAP has a Volunteers in Transportation tech brief to get started with a program.
- A friendly smile makes a big difference, especially in these difficult times. Read this story about a CENTRO bus driver’s “Smile Behind the Mask.”
- Liv believes that is knowing riders as individuals rather than demographics.

**Question 6:** What are some hurdles that some Rural Transit Heroes are facing beyond COVID?

**Answers:**

- National RTAP Executive Director Robin Phillips answered, “This has been a rough year. The good hearts and persistent community service of rural and tribal programs have been a source of light in all of this. Transit can take you on a point to point bike ride, outside, socially distant, and fun!”
- Michael stated that there are definitely good things that we have learned and can try to continue doing. He wondered what will be the new normal?
- Julia mused on the uncertainty of what public transit will look like - people have other ways to do things, such as telehealth and grocery delivery. She asked, “Will they come back to riding the bus or will they continue with their new way of life?”
- So many transit systems delivered meals and other essentials. Kari wonders if there's a place for that as an ongoing service as part of transit. Transit is about more than when you're on the bus. It's one of the backbones of the community that can help those most in need.
- For more information on the intersection of transportation and food access, check out the NORC Walsh Center’s Rural Social Determinants of Health Toolkit.
- National RTAP hopes that some of the services like food delivery that began during the pandemic will continue. They have changed a lot of people's lives. Food insecurity is unfortunately something that may not go away, and Rural Transit Heroes can always play a part in diminishing it. Whatever the future holds, COVID-19 has changed the way a lot of us work and our Rural Transit Heroes need to think of ways to be successful in a virtual world with different approaches to training and getting things done.
- Beth Osborne, Director of Transportation for America, talked about important issues. “Some members of Congress who claim to represent rural areas say transit is not a rural issue,” explained Beth. “This is dismissive all of those who rely on that transit for access to work, school, healthy food and medical care. It is also dismissive of the transit workers.”
- NUMTOT Moderator Jerome Alexander Horne feels that transit isn't just an urban issue. There are multiple hundreds of small town/rural transit systems that provide critical lifeline services to people. It's in the entire nation's best interest to not only save transit but make it better. Even if you don't ride transit, someone you depend on probably does. Whether it's a line cook at your favorite restaurant, the warehouse worker making sure you get your Prime delivery or the nurse saving lives at your local hospital, they depend on transit to do their jobs. Every community, especially smaller rural ones, have aging populations who can no longer drive and transit is a lifeline to health appointments, the grocery store and even social connection. Let your elected officials know the value transit brings to places large and small. Transit should not be a partisan issue. It should be a quality of life issue. It should be a
humanitarian issue. It should be a "we care about everyone and providing access to opportunity is a basic right" issue.

**Question 7:** What are some traits that embody Rural Transit Heroes?

**Answers:**
- Julia felt that some traits that embody Rural Transit Heroes are dependable, patient, kind and heroic! These heroes are quick to act in times of need and are always there when you need them.
- Michael added the trait of patience.
- Kari exclaimed, “It's amazing what dedicated rural transit folks can do!”
- From Liv - Persistence. Tenacity. Creativity and ingenuity.

**Question 8:** You’ve seen our Rural Transit Heroes photo contest entries. Which have really inspired you?

**Answers:**
- National RTAP agreed that all the Rural Transit Heroes stories are inspirational! This year, most of all, we wanted to do something to recognize all the Rural Transit Heroes we can. The photos showed the extraordinary ways today’s transit staff have overcome obstacles to deliver excellent service. They were particularly inspired by the story of James Johnson, a driver from Lowndes County/MIDS Transportation who drove a passenger about 2,000 miles to be reunited with her family.
- Kari exclaimed, “The pictures really made it special!”
- Julia said that the photos were inspiring and remind us all how vital and essential Public Transit is to so many! “What Michael Wilson and Flint Hills aTa Bus did with Meals on Wheels was truly inspiring,” said Julia. “With the pandemic, some people no longer have or have limited access to meal sites so this was a very valuable service to offer. Way to go, Mike!”
- NORC Walsh Center is inspired by all of these heroes, particularly the great work of Flint Hills Area Transportation, volunteering to run a Meals on Wheels route in Manhattan, KS, and delivering 100 meals a day to older adults.
- Michael wasn’t able to select a single favorite. “It’s cheesy,” he said, “but all of them. We are all heroes to someone and that is what we do this for.”