



Amalgamated Transit Union

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Office of the International President

September 22, 2021

Jen Easterly, Director
Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)
Via email

Dear Ms. Easterly:

On behalf of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the largest union representing public transit workers in the U.S., we are pleased to offer comments on the President's National Infrastructure Advisory Council (NIAC) Workforce and Talent Management Study examining the challenges facing the critical infrastructure workforce.

Unfortunately, we wholeheartedly agree with the panel's sobering conclusion that the workforce development system in the United States lacks the coordination, data, and strategic human capital management necessary to ensure a skilled workforce for critical infrastructure.

The public transportation industry, like many service-based sectors in the United States, is currently faced with major workforce challenges. A large percentage of the blue collar transit workforce will be retiring within the next few years. Transit has the highest percentage of aging workers in the U.S. among all industries: 35% are over the age of 55. There is no pipeline of replacements on the horizon because due to a number of factors, including safety and quality of life, the industry has a negative public image that hampers its ability to attract, recruit, and retain quality employees. And, for the existing workforce, new technology is rapidly changing the way transit agencies function.

Yet, relatively few programs exist to provide training to frontline workers so that they can perform their jobs adequately, move up the career ladder, and help the nation's transit agencies operate at maximum efficiency. The industry focus is heavily skewed to white collar needs. U.S. Department of Transportation workforce funding is focused on university programs and university transportation centers, but many agencies find their biggest need is skilled blue collar technicians, electricians, and in signals. While approximately 80% of transit employees are blue collar frontline workers, including bus and train operators, mechanics, technicians, and facilities maintainers, the overwhelming majority of the Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) limited workforce funds go to white collar.

Preventive maintenance on a transit bus or rail car nowadays is quite different than it was just a few years ago, when a skilled mechanic could likely have made due with the contents of their tool box. Advances in computer technology have fundamentally changed the nature of the job. Yet, training has not kept pace, and huge skill gaps have developed. As a result, transit workers often lose out on work that they could easily perform. The equivalent of 88% of today's transit workforce will have to be hired and trained in

the next 10 years, but the transit industry lacks the capacity to train the next generation of blue collar technicians.

The bipartisan infrastructure bill recently passed by the U.S. Senate includes billions of dollars to expedite the nationwide conversion to zero emission transit buses within the next few years. While this is a laudable goal, it will require a massive undertaking to provide the training necessary to thousands of workers who will be responsible for providing preventive maintenance and repair on these cutting-edge vehicles. Performing this work safely must be an industry priority. Not one transit worker should be electrocuted because they were working on an electric vehicle without proper training.

As other industries have demonstrated, the best way to close skill gaps is through training – but not just any type of training. Apprenticeship programs established through labor-management partnerships are without question the best way to address skills training. When both sides buy in, the results can be quite effective. While labor and management often disagree on various issues, in transit, we have recognized that by working together, we can provide training to workers with a thirst for the knowledge they need to move up the career ladder, while saving management precious resources that they can put into improved and expanded service. It's a win-win for everyone — and at all sizes and types of public and community transportation operations.

Recent progress has been made under the new leadership at FTA, which just last month created the first ever National Transit Workforce Center for frontline employees. The Center will conduct technical assistance activities for transit agencies with a strong focus on frontline transit worker skill development. It will serve as a hub to help transit agencies recruit, hire, train, and retain the diverse workforce needed now and in the future. The Center will help address the long-term needs of the national transit workforce and improve diversity and equity in our industry. Unfortunately, the Center was only provided seed money (\$5 million total), and future funding is uncertain.

The transit workforce crisis is not solely on the maintenance side. Due to several factors, including low starting pay, split shifts, and dangerous working conditions, there is currently a major bus driver shortage throughout North America, resulting in existing drivers being forced to work overtime – a serious threat to public safety. Unfortunately, the transit industry sorely lacks a national program to address long-standing needs to improve training and increase the retention rate of new drivers. Traditional bus driver training has focused on the safe operation of the vehicle, with less attention paid to enhancing and valuing drivers' day-to-day relationships with passengers, even though it is these interactions and issues which often elevate drivers' stress, lead to related health problems; and undermine their commitment to the job. Despite this looming workforce crisis, few programs provide workforce development specifically for frontline transit workers like bus drivers and train operators. Retention issues have caused service disruptions all across the nation, and not just at the nation's largest transit operators. Indeed, small city, rural and tribal transit systems are also dealing with these matters.

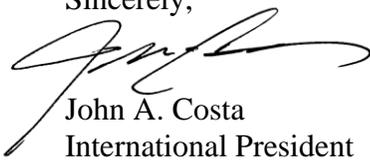
The school bus industry, where we also represent thousands of workers, has many of these same driver shortage issues. Last week, Massachusetts called out the National Guard to drive school buses. While the national school bus driver shortage is not new, a labor shortage across many sectors and the pandemic's lingering effects have made it worse, since about half the workforce is over 65 years old.

While all of NIAC's near-term, mid-term, and long-term recommendations are critical, I would especially stress the value of launching a public awareness and image campaign to highlight the importance and opportunity of critical infrastructure careers and jobs. Along the same lines, we absolutely need to reshape cultural perceptions of technical careers by reinforcing the importance and public service benefits of critical infrastructure jobs through sustained education and awareness efforts. This has been a battle in the public transit industry for years. Transit has a negative public image and stigma which stand in the way of us recruiting a pipeline of new workers to replace the incredible number of our members who will be retiring in the next few years.

ATU also agrees with the NIAC's core principle that all workers must have equitable access to the education, training, and resources necessary to begin and advance in critical infrastructure careers. We sincerely hope that the recommendations made by this expert panel will be carried out in the near future. There is no more time to waste.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,



John A. Costa
International President