



Community Hearing on Transit Equity 2021: Findings and Recommendations

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Introduction

In February 2018, the [Amalgamated Transit Union \(ATU\)](#) partnered with the [Labor Network for Sustainability](#) to launch Transit Equity Day in honor of Rosa Parks' birthday, which is on February 4.[1] We chose to honor Rosa Parks for the role she played in the civil rights movement by refusing to give up her seat at the front of the bus and, in doing so, lift up transit as a workers' rights, civil rights, and climate-justice issue.

Since its launch, Transit Equity Day has grown each year. In 2020, there were events in 50 cities and a social media explosion that brought attention to transit equity beyond just the participating locations. Just as important, a Transit Equity Network emerged through the process. Consisting largely of grassroots advocates, the network has grown and relationships have deepened both locally and nationally.

After the success of Transit Equity Day 2020, participants were ready to work together on a national initiative. We wanted to develop a stronger sense of unity and shared values. We sought to shape a broad vision of what we wanted from our transit systems across the nation. But rather than creating a vision document ourselves, the Transit Equity Network leaders wanted first to hear directly and collectively from transit stakeholders—riders, workers, families reliant on transit, and community activists—about their needs, frustrations, and hopes.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic and, with it, a transit crisis. With ridership plummeting and state and local budgets imperiled, it became clear that transit was facing an existential threat. The pandemic laid bare the crisis of inequality and highlighted the essential need for transit.[2] While thousands of workers in sectors not considered essential stopped using transit, millions of essential workers continued to need to get to their jobs: workers in healthcare, public service, food and agriculture and others continued to work to keep us safe and healthy. Many of these workers were in low-wage jobs and dependent on transit, but transit services were being cut and health and safety was not adequately addressed in many systems that remained in service. The dangers associated with the pandemic were exacerbated for unemployed and low-income riders who rely on transit to get to healthcare appointments, grocery stores, pharmacies, and other necessary retail establishments. The idea of holding a [\(virtual\) community hearing on transit](#) was born in this context. The crisis caused by the pandemic made it even more apparent that we needed to hear directly from transit riders and workers about how to address the crisis in the short-term and improve the system in the long-term. For Transit Equity Day 2021 we convened two days of live testimony—as well as pre-recorded testimony—over Zoom with hearing facilitators who came from the policy and social justice world, with Spanish interpretation and to the extent we were able, accommodations for the physically challenged.[3]

This report is a summary of those hearings—rooted in the experience of workers and riders. We have tried to highlight recurring themes, distill the most salient points and remain faithful to the intent of the testimony. Transit riders and workers were very clear about the important role transit plays in their lives and in their community. At the same time, they identified problems with the current

system and offered constructive solutions to address them. We structured each key theme of these findings in a similar fashion:

- 1) recognize the critical benefit of public transit to those who are most vulnerable;
- 2) identify the existing problems and inequities in public transit;
- 3) propose policy solutions to both fix and improve public transit.

The results were inspiring. We learned many lessons—much of what we heard validated what we had believed, but a lot was new and significant. We heard from 43 people testifying live, 22 through pre-recorded testimonies, and three by way of written testimony. Seventeen hearing facilitators elicited additional comments and expressed their own perspectives.

The following pages feature summaries of what we heard, divided into key themes. We strived to encapsulate testimony from all who participated. If we were remiss in not capturing statements from all live, recorded, and written testimony, it is only because each statement was rich enough for its own report. While not all may be captured here, they can all be read, heard, or viewed at bit.ly/savetransit2021.

We hope that these voices and our lessons learned will be a valuable asset to decision-makers at the national, state, and local level. The most important conclusion is that transit is an essential service—a civil right—and deserves to be treated as such.

Racial Equity

The demand for racial equity within United States transit systems has been a central theme of Transit Equity Day. Structural racism has always been woven into U.S transportation systems and the communities that rely on them. It has only been through [resistance and protest](#) that we have begun to dismantle this enduring legacy. As [Jovanka Beckles](#) of San Francisco, California, recounted during her testimony, specifically with regard to Black ridership, “Black activism has a long history of intersecting with transit rights activism; from the Freedom Riders to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Rosa Parks, Black organizers have seen transit justice as a key part of the struggle for civil rights and justice for all.”

Existing Inequities

Prior to COVID-19, local and national actions organized in honor of [Transit Equity Day](#) often brought the economic needs of communities of color into focus while addressing the grave impacts of service cuts, unsafe or inaccessible bus stops, high fares, and air pollution.

In the spring and summer of 2020, as the “Coronavirus Depression”^[4] set in, emergency funding was far short of what was truly needed—there was \$25 billion in emergency transit operating funding in the CARES Act and another \$14 billion in funding passed in December 2020. After these two rounds of funding, there was still an estimated shortfall of \$39 billion—the American Rescue Plan provided

most of this shortfall with \$30 billion. In all, the federal government has provided \$69 billion in transit emergency operating funds over the last year—none of which was or has been allocated for expansion and non-operating funds.

Given that people of color were [hardest hit by impacts of the pandemic](#), it became clear that the lack of emergency funding to ensure a safe and adequate transit system across the U.S. would exacerbate racial inequities and deprive communities of color the means to get from one place to the next, even to workplaces where they were expected to report as essential workers.

“Since day one [of the pandemic], the ATU has been fighting for basic necessities like personal protective equipment [and] mandatory mask enforcement to give our members the provisions they need to continue moving the public,” [Kenneth Kirk](#), International Secretary-Treasurer of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) said. Kirk, who spoke at the Opening Panel on Day 1 of the Community Hearing referred to “devastating cuts” to transit service after the start of the COVID-19 shutdown, emphasizing the subsequent overcrowding on busses, “putting drivers and the public even more at risk, and layoffs, leaving workers without health insurance during a pandemic. Due to racial and socioeconomic disparities, transit workers’ and riders’ health has been disproportionately affected. Studies have shown that not only are people of color more likely to ride public transportation, but we are also more likely to work jobs that require face-to-face interaction with the public, increasing exposure to the virus.”

[Onyinye Alheri](#) of the Baltimore People’s Climate Movement, whose sole source of transportation is public transit, lamented the inconsistent service in Baltimore. Alheiri noted this was “made even worse during the pandemic because bus lines run even less frequently and are always overcrowded, increasing the risk of everyone on board contracting or spreading COVID. Considering that most riders in our city are people of color, this is likely one of the reasons we are unevenly impacted by this pandemic.”

[Crystal Greenberg](#), a registered nurse at Greater Baltimore Medical Center in Maryland, talked about how the many “highly segregated” and neglected neighborhoods which have been victim to years of “racist policies and redlining” have seen “food deserts and community isolation due to lack of equitable transit options” and “public transportation that is available is unreliable, difficult to navigate, time consuming and expensive.” These issues are apparent in her daily role as a nurse. Greenberg notes that patients are trapped in their neighborhoods, “leaving them with potentially limited options for groceries or prepared foods, as well as access to other important community resources like medicine or healthcare professionals.”

In Montgomery County, Maryland, [Clint Sobratti](#), a bus operator and transit coordinator for Montgomery County Department of Transportation and an elected officer of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994 (MCGEO), praised the diverse ridership of Montgomery County Ride On buses, as a reflection of the diversity of the community, “Whether our passengers are young, old, able, disabled, black, brown or white, our buses serve communities of all ethnicities and socio-economic status.” But Sobratti was quick to note that Montgomery County includes “impoverished

[communities] who have a greater dependency on public transportation, which is why we need to have a reliable transit system.”

Other testifiers echoed Mr. Sobratti’s observation about the diversity of public transit riders and the sense of community it engenders. Award-winning actress [Celia Keenan-Bolger](#) spoke movingly about how the New York subway system brings people together through the shared community experience of riding. Whether it’s a post-theater conversation about a play, or parent-child conversations about a political slogan on a hat, or the symbolism of religious clothing, transit is a community education experience and an essential part of a democracy.

[Igor Tregub](#), who testified on behalf of the San Francisco Bay Chapters (Berkeley, California, Ohlone Land) of the Sierra Club, echoed Greenberg’s point about reliable transit being synonymous with economic opportunity. “Urban transit systems in most American cities have become a genuine civil rights issue because the layout of rapid transit systems determines the accessibility of jobs,” he said.

From Chicago, [Audrey Wennink](#), director of transportation for Metropolitan Planning Council, a Chicago non-profit policy organization that partners with businesses, communities and governments to help improve mobility and infrastructure throughout the city, noted, “Poor transit service affects Black Americans the most, since they are four times more likely to take transit than white workers.”

[Shivani Parikh](#), the outreach coordinator to Asian communities at the Center for Safety and Change, the only nonprofit providing shelter and services for victims and survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in Rockland County, New York, said that for their constituents whose first language is an Asian one, language is a barrier—pointing to an aspect of racial disadvantage in transit.

“In suburban areas, too often people are unable to walk to their nearest bus stop because they’re not sure where it is, because they’re not well demarcated or because they simply don’t know where they are, Parikh said. “[This] information, especially in communities where there is large ranges of socioeconomic distribution of wealth, means that the people who may need these services the most may need other language services that aren’t being provided when, again, leadership is predominantly white and upper middle class.”

Policy Solutions

Some testifiers shared successes in the areas of racial equity in transit, highlighting solutions that can lead to achieving transit equity. One such testimony is from a transit manufacturing worker’s point of view. [Cevin Carlson](#), a quality inspector for light rail vehicles at Kinkisharyo International and a union steward for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 11, said the Kinkisharyo railcar manufacturing facility “saved and brought back financially my city.” Carlson’s home of Lancaster, California (the majority of whose population are people of color according to the [2010 Census](#)) was reinvigorated by light rail manufacturing. Carlson added,

“Starting with the company, when they came into my city, not only did it bring living wages, but it also created a foundation that you can start a family off of. ... I locally work in cities like Los Angeles, Crenshaw, Inglewood and Monrovia, conducting tests and experience with local passengers ... Starting with this company was the first time I ever had where I actually felt comfortable where I wasn’t looked at as a minority.”

[Howard Wong](#), an architect and past president of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers Local 21, grew up in San Francisco’s Chinatown, “an enclave that had forced Asian-Americans to live within a few blocks, 10 square blocks of San Francisco, because there was no other neighborhood that welcomed them.” Wong emphasized that transit “was a key part of daily life.” He recalled growing up in the post baby boom World War II era, when most people didn’t have a car,

“Transit was an important part of exposing children to the zoo, which was on the other side of San Francisco, or looking at things outside of the Bay Area. As one went to school, commuting by MUNI bus was a key ingredient to our gaining education, access to our high school, access to San Francisco State College or access to UC Berkeley...Throughout our history and through my career, I have seen the importance of public transit and how it integrated many, many types of people into the American mainstream and continues so today.”

[Samantha Garcia](#), a first-generation college student and Dreamer^[5] who lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico (and a co-author of this report), said, “I owe my college education to a lot of things, but two come to mind. One was a scholarship and the other public transit. My scholarship required me to transfer to the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque, from a community college in Santa Fe. Santa Fe and Albuquerque are an hour apart and so each day I took the New Mexico Rail Runner Express, one of the few rail ridership options in New Mexico, into Albuquerque.” She noted that the Rail Runner shut down altogether for nearly a year, only reopening this March. Samantha remarked, “I was reminded that had it not been for Rosa Parks’ courage and unyielding commitment to racial equity, I wouldn’t have been able to ride any form of public transit with human dignity. Thanks to her, to the organizers, leaders, and every single transit rider of the Montgomery bus boycott who stood up and said no more—transit segregation collapsed.”

In order for public transit to provide economic opportunities to lower-income people, [Jovanka Beckles](#) recommended treating “public transit like a human right” and getting “rid of fares permanently.” She added that there is an opportunity for transit systems to offer “a unique way to restructure society in a way that addresses historical inequities in our society, particularly those that deal with the Black community.” In the East Bay, Beckles called the AC transit bus system “an essential tool in the Black community. ATU Local 192, which represents the AC transit bus drivers and mechanics, is overwhelmingly Black, Beckles continued, “More than any other folks in the Bay Area, Black folks, we rely on AC transit as a way to get around and as a source of stable, well-paying union jobs.”

[Elizabeth Chun Hye Lee](#) of United Methodist Women (UMW), who grew up in Queens, New York, recalled, “the main subway I have used for most of my life is known as, either by some proudly or others pejoratively, as the Immigrant Express or the International Express, the 7 line.” She said UMW has found it vital—while there’s still work to be done—for its members to build partnerships with people in the community on areas related to transit equity. She cited their work with NAACP on their solar equity initiative and overall work “in the climate context” with Indigenous and Latino communities as well.

One of the definitive comments on imagining true transit equity was by [Steven Hamm](#), member of Transport Workers United of American (TWU) Local 229 and president of the Hudson County, New Jersey chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute who said, “By investing in transit, we can also address the racial disparities that plague our country. If we promote unions and collective bargaining, we can address economic inequality. The vision I have for our communities is one where all people can easily, reliably and affordably travel where they want to go.”

Today, people of color comprise [60 percent of transit ridership](#). Black communities single handedly make up 24 percent, accounting for the largest population to use public transportation amongst communities of color. That’s why Rosa Parks, who helped launch the Montgomery Bus Boycott when she refused to give up her seat to a white passenger, is remembered as a major figure in the transit equity movement. And it’s why, on Parks’ birthday this past February, Secretary of the Department of Transportation [Pete Buttigieg promised his department’s commitment](#) “to honoring her legacy by ensuring equity is central to everything we do.”

Transit has positively and significantly impacted the lives of millions who have for so long relied on it to accomplish essential and daily activities. It is critical to continue cultivating spaces where dialogue and discussions regarding transit equity occur. A good first step toward this end is the level of awareness raised during the last two Transit Equity Days by public officials such as Boston City Councilmember Michelle Wu, Rep. Ilhan Omar in Minneapolis, Rep. Barbara Lee in Oakland, Rep. Jesús “Chuy” García in Chicago, Montgomery County Councilmember Evan Glass, and Secretary Buttigieg who now talks regularly and publicly about the need for “transit equity.” Webinars, social media posts and numerous media placements reflect how seriously these public officials are taking equity and transit, and the recent enactment of the American Rescue Plan—illustrate that new funding can take us closer to our goal of ensuring equal and more ample access to transit for all.

While the Transit Equity Network is encouraged that political leaders have offered their support, we also know that a mass socio-political movement is vital to accomplish systemic change. Public transportation is undoubtedly a civil-rights cause. Educating and organizing communities with the skills and knowledge to mobilize and be civically engaged is fundamental.

Access and Justice

In addition to our focus on racial equity, we found that for much of the population—low-income, those living in rural areas, seniors, youth, and people with disabilities—public transit is a lifeline to get to work, school, the grocery store and doctor’s appointments. [Laurel Mendes](#) in Baltimore, Maryland, who is wheelchair-dependent, talked about the extreme challenges when accessing transit, “I have lost count of how many times I have waited at a stop for the bus and the bus has driven past me despite the fact that I am waving my arms and hollering at the top of my lungs, ‘Slow the bus! Slow the bus!’ Now, I understand that’s because I’m just a little over a meter tall because I’m sitting down in my wheelchair. I can also not remember to recount how many times that bus has pulled up and said, ‘My lift is broken, I can’t help you,’ and then driven off,” she said.

Increasing accessibility, affordability, and reliability of public transit would be critically beneficial to the majority of Americans. [Crystal Greenberg](#) adds in her testimony that public transit “is one of the best ways for community members like my patients to be able to survive and thrive.”

Existing Inequities

There are approximately 1,300 rural and close to 930 urban [public transit systems in place](#), but nearly [half of us](#) have no access to public transit. Again, COVID-19 only exacerbated this imbalance which, unfortunately, didn’t surprise the many who already experience inaccessibility and know how well it is built into the system. Riders confront limited routes, slashed service times, and limited disability accommodations due to COVID-19.

In his pre-recorded testimony, [Simon Husted](#) from Buffalo Transit Riders United in New York reflected that COVID-19 means “ridership is down, it’s down 50% here in Buffalo,” but “it does not mean that the need is any less.”

This inaccessibility disproportionately affects people of color, particularly those who are low-income and in poverty. In addition to her insights noted in the Racial Equity section, transit activist [Jovanka Beckles](#) said, “Lower income people are especially likely to rely on the bus. Sixty five percent of weekday riders come from low income households.”

And this isn’t just a worry for people who live in cities—[more than one million households](#) in rural America don’t have a vehicle. In rural communities like Wolfe County, Kentucky, Bullock County, Alabama, and Allendale County, South Carolina, fully [20 percent](#) of households don’t have a car.

“My bus pass is the key to my independence,” said [Kathi Zoern](#), a rider from Wausau, Wisconsin, with a vision impairment. But limited routes prevent her from performing basic tasks. “I can’t get to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get my voter ID,” she added, “because it’s outside the city limits.”

Unfortunately, situations like these are typical. More than [80 percent](#) of young adults with disabilities are prevented from doing daily activities due to a lack of transportation. And even when

there are sufficient routes, transit often is not equipped to properly serve people with disabilities. [Zach Karnazes](#), a disability activist and journalist in San Francisco, testified,

“Passengers will often yell, cuss, harass, even physically assault me for trying to get on the bus. Sometimes, you know, drivers yell at me as well and won’t let me on. And this would happen so frequently that I was afraid to leave my house, afraid to go into my community, see my friends, go to the grocery store.”

This is because there are not enough resources to properly train transit workers to accommodate people with disabilities. [Nancy Jackman](#), a transit mobility instructor from Duluth, Minnesota, helps people with visual or hearing impairments ride transit. But she feels exhausted from the uphill battle. “Transit workers seem very overworked and underappreciated for the types of problem solving that is demanded,” she reflected.

Many testimonies expressed the importance of transit for the young and the old. [Sister Barbara Pfarr](#), a Catholic nun from Elm Grove, Wisconsin, considered that as she ages, she may also become transit-dependent. “When I’m older and can’t drive anymore, I want to be able to get around,” she said. Many smaller towns and rural areas [tend to be older](#), and seniors are now outliving their ability to drive safely by an average of [7 to 10 years](#). Without transit options, many of these seniors will lose their independence.

Young people, particularly students, disproportionately rely on transit. [Wayne Scott](#), president of the Colorado Classified Employees Association – AFT, noted that “the lack of funding has driven districts to close neighborhood schools and at the same time increase the walking distance for students for up to two miles for high school students.” Lower income families are less likely to have reliable personal transit, making them even more dependent on the bus.

[Carl Williams](#), president of the Lawndale Federation of Classified Employees – AFT, emphasized that lack of transit options “just may be enough for students to drop out” if they have difficulty getting to school.

[Mahdi Hosseini](#), a recent high school graduate and organizer with Together4Brothers in Albuquerque, New Mexico, recounted his difficulty in getting to school on time.

“I had to take the bus to get to school because my family only had one car. I was waking up early in the morning, around 5 a.m., to get ready and eat my breakfast and catch the first bus. And if I missed the bus, then I had to wait for the next one, or I had to walk or run for the second bus. It was challenging for me to wake up early every day and try my best to not miss the bus and be on time in school. I had so much tardiness, over 100 tardies in one year, because I was arriving late, not because I was playing around, but because of public transportation. Some days the buses arrive early and some days they arrive late. The buses were never on time or the map would not show the right schedule. I also had challenges

regarding not having bus passes or it was going to be too much to pay every time I was getting on the bus.”

Victims and survivors of domestic abuse also disproportionately rely on transit. [Shivani Parikh](#), said a lack of public transit makes it harder for her constituents at the New York State Coalition Against Domestic Violence to get help. Service cuts can “greatly influence their sense of isolation, their experience of abuse, and their perceived ability to leave,” she warned.

Another overarching theme of the testimonies was a lack of proper representation of transit-dependent people among transit decisionmakers. [David Peter Alan](#), longtime transit advocate and rider from South Orange, New Jersey, testified, “I know of only one transit board member or senior manager dependent on the transit that he or she governs.”

Lack of access to transit not only applies to buses and trains but to paratransit services as well. [Ryan McGraw](#), healthcare community organizer at Access Living in Chicago, said: “Paratransit is a service that I and millions of other people with disabilities in the U.S. utilize to travel around their communities. The lack of quality paratransit services significantly hinders the ability of people with disabilities to live full lives within their communities. There is a diminishing number of bus routes in the suburbs of Chicago. This not only negatively affects riders of fixed route transit, but riders of paratransit as well.”

While most people’s livelihoods depend on transit, some Americans rely on transit by choice, and they should have the right to. [Bob Planthold](#), a rider in San Francisco, said, “I am, by choice, transit dependent. I’d rather have somebody else pay the bills for repair and maintenance and get me to and from the supermarket, clinics, and drugstores.”

The testimonies made clear that throughout the U.S., millions are forced to depend on transit that doesn’t fully meet their needs, while millions more have no access at all. This is unacceptable. Part of the justification for this disparity is that only people in dense, urban areas use transit. This is upside-down logic. The Hearing revealed that when people don’t use transit, it’s because it is nonexistent, unreliable or inaccessible.

Policy Solutions

A theme that emerged from the Hearing was the importance of intentionally designing public transit to account for the disparities that riders experience when accessing transit. Transit infrastructure must be expanded in urban communities as well as rural and tribal communities that experience a unique set of disparities. Lack of transit underpins inequality regarding accessing basic needs of food and grocery store options, healthcare services, community resources, jobs, worship and recreation.

Since public transit is a civil right, fares should be free and, at a minimum, subsidized. Several testimonies laud the importance of free and subsidized fares in their cities. [Mahdi Hosseini](#), who struggled with arriving at school on time, said Together4Brothers has won major victories for public transit access. In the summer of 2018 and 2019, they successfully organized for the city to provide free summer bus passes, and since March 2019, youth 18 years and younger have had free bus fares. This past Transit Equity Day, Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller announced that free bus fares will now be permanent for youth 25 years and younger and seniors 65 years and older. While Mahdi is elated about this success, the work of Together4Brothers is not yet done. Mahdi concluded, "We will keep organizing until there are free bus rides for all."

The city of San Francisco also subsidizes rides for seniors and people with disabilities who have difficulty accessing bus routes. Disability activists testify that public transit agencies must prioritize and invest in accessibility for people with disabilities. Every transit agency ought to provide audible stop announcements, print signage, wheelchair ramps, paratransit, and proper training and compensation for transit workers to accommodate people with disabilities.

[Zach Karnazes](#) offered something to aspire to when disabled riders and transit workers can achieve when they join together to negotiate with transit agencies to ensure greater accessibility: "We've actually managed to secure the customer service trainings in the union contract. We now have a new disability complaint web page on the transportation website. We now have a new disability complaint form on the transportation website. And the union is working closely with our community so that we can have our perspectives shared in the training and education of drivers, so that we can change the old attitudes," he reflected. Other transit agencies should learn from this alliance of unions and disability activists. Zach also talked about the alliance he formed with Roger Marengo, president of Transport Workers Union of America Local 250A to reach these outcomes:

"And right from the bat [Roger Marengo], got stuff done. Whereas the city had ignored me for years, the union started to meet with me one on one, started to meet with the community, come to our disability meetings at City Hall and with various non-profits, and began to put things into action for positive reinforcement, positive incentivization for drivers to board us and focus on education rather than punishment. So I'm here to share with you some good news."

Testifiers with disabilities also emphasized that rideshare companies like Uber and Lyft should not be allowed to receive government contracts when they do not provide services to wheelchair users or people that do not have smartphones. That funding ought to be allocated to public transit that ensures accessibility.

During the Opening Panel on Day 1 of the Community Hearing, [Julie Reiskin](#), executive director of the Colorado Cross Disability Coalition, argued that in order to adequately meet the needs of these vulnerable groups, transit must be treated as a public utility rather than a commodity. The government should be responsible for ensuring that transit meets the needs of everyone. If transit is only viewed as "valuable" to low-income or folks that have no other option, it will never be properly

resourced. She stated, “if we have something that’s for everyone, it’ll then be resourced enough to be a good system.”

[Audrey Wennink](#) agreed, adding, “we need to make transit work for everyone and be attractive and be running on the schedules that people are working too. Our transit system tends to be too planned for the rush hours, morning and evening rush hours, and not to serve people that worked alternative schedules, which caregivers often do.” Transit must be able to serve everybody, any time of the day.

Transit is an essential part of our transportation system and should be expanded to underserved areas of the country. At the same time, although we should rebalance our priorities between single-use vehicles and transit, there will always be a need for automobiles, including taxis.

[Barry Taranto](#) of the San Francisco Taxi Workers Alliance testified about how his taxi agency supports accessibility where public transit lacks. They offer subsidized rides for seniors and people with disabilities who cannot get on a bus or live too far away from the nearest bus route or nearest bus stop. He said, “We provide services where they’re underserved residents who need to get to their medical appointments, to grocery stores, to shopping districts, to medical appointments, to hospitals, from hospitals. We also provide delivery of blood from the Red Cross or even the blood bank to the hospitals in the city and outside.” Additionally, they have a fleet of accommodating vehicles for seniors and people with disabilities.

Just as taxis help fill gaps where public transit is lacking, bike share can help riders go the first and last mile. [Stan Jones](#), representative of TWU Local 320 in San Francisco, which represents bike share workers, said that when the pandemic made “many buses and trains sidelined, bike share was there.” He added: “Most of our members are entry level employees, people of color from low resource communities, former veterans and folks impacted by the criminal justice system.”

With regards to paratransit, [Ryan McGraw](#) added, “Paratransit is not a gift or a favor given to people with disabilities out of pity. It is instead a service, a right we are entitled to under the Americans with Disabilities Act. People with disabilities have the right to be on time to any appointment they may have, job or anywhere else they decide to go. ... Therefore, paratransit organizations must take steps to improve their services and be funded in an appropriate manner to make improved services happen.”

An overarching theme from the testimonies was that decision-makers for public transit should themselves be largely transit dependent, and solutions should be forged by a process that gives everyone a seat at the table: organizations led by people of color, workers, low-income, rural, senior, youth, and disabled communities.

Jobs and Workers’ Rights

Availability, reliability, and affordability of public transit are beneficial to entire communities and certainly to the frontline workers who use transit services. As an important co-benefit, transit

provides a unique opportunity to empower workers with sustainable job opportunities; the manufacturing, operation, and maintenance, of transit vehicles can all be creators and facilitators of good, green, union jobs. As [Salvador Herrera](#), director of organizing for the International Painters and Allied Trades District Council 88, reminded us: “Having a reliable transportation system opens up opportunities for working people to live more fulfilling lives. Expanding existing programs could help working families acquire new work opportunities. [It] will make the lives of working people easier, more efficient, and less stressful.”

Transit creates good jobs with family-sustaining wages and benefits. A relatively high percentage of workers who operate and maintain transit vehicles are in unions and able to negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment. There is a growing movement for workers who manufacture and assemble transit to unionize and to re-shore our manufacturing of rolling stock. Transit is funded with taxpayer dollars, and we should work to ensure that we realize the full potential and co-benefits of government spending to create high quality family-sustaining jobs here in the U.S.

Existing Inequities

An essential component of transit equity is the impact a well-funded, well-run system (or the lack thereof) can have on workers. From the unionized manufacturers and drivers to the frontline worker riders, supporting and expanding public transit is inexorably linked to uplifting workers. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Transit Equity Day was an opportunity for community members to focus on and address the impact of potential/actual funding cuts to already limited transit services.

Now, in the face of reduced ridership and revenues, the pressure on public transit systems that were already severely underfunded has increased enormously. Moreover, the health and direct economic impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on transit providers and riders cannot be overstated.

[Kenneth Kirk](#) elaborated:

“During the pandemic, transit workers have been a lifeline to our communities and frontline workers, doctors, nurses, sanitation workers who must get to their life saving jobs. Transit workers have been heroes moving heroes. Just because transit workers have been heroes in the fight against the virus doesn’t mean they’re immune to the fear of not returning home to their families.”

Kirk underscores the sobering reality that ATU, at the time of this writing, is grieving the loss of 148 of its members to COVID-19 (an increase since February 3, when there were 120 reported fatalities at ATU from COVID-19). Yet, as vaccinations started to be administered to essential workers and others around the country, transit operators were under prioritized.

[Sally Gellert](#), a transit rider of the Lackawanna Coalition in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey, also discussed the disproportionate exposure transit drivers face during COVID-19. “A passenger may be on a bus for just 10 or 30 minutes. A driver faces increased risk from accumulation of many small exposures in an eight-hour day,” she noted.

The risks of contracting and spreading COVID-19, and the fears associated with infecting loved ones and fellow community members, are not limited to transit workers. It also impacts the essential workers who rely on transit to commute to work. In the U.S., [2.8 million](#) essential workers ride transit to get to their jobs, accounting for [36 percent](#) of total transit commuters. [Iliana Stampur](#), a teacher, singer, mom, and daily train rider in New Orleans, Louisiana, highlighted how “it’s important that our trains are clean and reliable and affordable, not only for the people who will come and visit our wonderful city but most of all for the people who are working minimum wage jobs.”

Essential workers aren’t the only workers reliant on a well-funded transit system. [Jeffrey Omura](#), an actor and transit activist from New York City, emphasized how “skyrocketing rents increasingly price artists out of Manhattan. Meanwhile, all of our job opportunities remain in Midtown, so for New York artists and most of our city’s residents who live in more affordable neighborhoods far away, public transportation is vital to connecting us with jobs.”

[Audrey Wennink](#) spoke about a series of focus groups centered around people from the south and west sides of Chicago who received career support services at Chicago’s Network of American Job Centers. The results found that participants “repeatedly identified transportation costs as barriers that disincentivize taking jobs throughout much of the region. Three-quarters of them said transportation challenges made them miss out on job opportunities and were a barrier to keeping a job.”

[Jonathan Smith](#), president of the New York Metro Area Postal Union Local 10, testified that many postal workers rely on public transit to commute to work. He said, “if it were not for the transit in our city, we would not be able to process your mail because our workers would find it near impossible to get to and from work.”

Limited routes for essential workers were not just a concern for testifiers amid COVID-19 but also for those living in the rural areas. [Althea Brennan](#), who studies Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University and is a labor activist with United Students Against Sweatshops Local 3, discussed the importance of public transit for workers in rural areas. She explained, “economic stability and a job with all the protections unions bring is a dream out of reach for many Americans as is. Those jobs will not be available for many of the people who need them the most if we don’t invest in rural public transportation.”

[Sister Barbara Pfarr](#) helps to operate a Mother House where sick and elderly sisters reside. But at least half of her food and health care workers don’t have a driver’s license, she said, and they’re missing shifts due to a lack of transit. As a result, residents in facilities like hers “don’t get their services because their workers can’t get to work, through no fault of their own.”

And part of the reason for limited routes is a lack of bus drivers. [Patricia Fedewa](#), bus rider in Detroit, said, “We do not have enough bus drivers to even meet the reduced COVID schedule. Our drivers are the lowest paid in the country and not surprisingly, the city has a hard time hiring and keeping them. We do not have enough bus service, not enough routes, and those that we do have, not enough frequency.”

The compounding impact of a lack of bus drivers, due entirely to underfunding and undervaluing, is that workers who are transit-reliant often have to take an entire day off work to successfully navigate to their appointments. [Crystal Greenberg](#) highlighted how “it is quite common to hear patients express concerns about having to take a day off work and spend an entire day navigating Baltimore’s public transportation system just to reach one health care appointment or grocery store.”

Transit-reliant workers are disproportionately responsible for keeping our communities fed, educated, healthy, and protected during these unprecedented times. And yet, they have been rewarded for their efforts with reduced bus services, cancelled improvements, and unsafe conditions. In his testimony, [Salvador Herrera](#) added, “Frustration, stress, and time spent waiting and depending on an unreliable system can be a burden for working people. After working a 12-hour shift on your feet all day, the last thing you want to do is wait and commute over an hour to make it home.”

Workers’ rights and climate protection can go hand-in-hand if we re-imagine what we mean when we talk about transitioning away from single occupancy vehicles to transit. Stan Jones testified about TWU’s victories in supporting Bike Share workers seeking to form a union. Now, the workers providing a non-polluting urban mobility solution have union representation. What’s more, his Local has “worked tirelessly with our employer and partners” for positive initiatives such as solar-powered kiosks at bicycle docking stations and solar panels in bicycle baskets to power the front and rear lights. Bike Share is one answer to the “first-mile/last-mile” problem with which transit planners continue to grapple. Riders will opt to drive if there is not an inexpensive and efficient manner to get to a transit stop. Providing that solution and employing workers who are able to negotiate their own working conditions through their union is a win-win for all.

Policy Solutions

Testimony by workers during the Community Hearing affirmed that investing in transit is investing in working people, families, and communities—and that transit should be treated as essential, especially for essential workers. We frequently hear that a robust, reliable transit system helps workers get to work and keeps the economy moving. Transit investments create jobs.^[6]

Either directly or indirectly, transit employs workers in construction, manufacturing, material/component production, operation, and maintenance.

[Steven McCauley](#), [Jonathan Smith](#), [Cevin Carlson](#), and [Stan Jones](#) were among several who testified on the importance of creating quality, family-sustaining jobs. Several point to collective bargaining as the best way to convert any job into a quality one. Additionally, expansion of collective bargaining is key to addressing the staggering income inequality that plagues our country. [Jonathan Smith](#) emphasized, “as we invest in transit, let us keep transit workers front and center. Let us make sure that transit stays public. Let us make sure that transit workers have a free and fair opportunity to join a union and engage in collective bargaining to improve their work conditions.”

Transit riders and workers alike decried the slow, inadequate and inconsistent response to transit health and safety hazards presented by COVID-19. Personal protective equipment (PPE) was in too many cases slow to be provided to transit operators; Likewise, rear-door boarding on buses, which by necessity meant free fares, was not uniformly implemented. Nor were all transit workers entitled to hazard pay and paid sick and family leave. These gaps had real and tragic consequences, including the devastating fatalities among transit workers, such as what [Kenneth Kirk](#) talked about.

The fault for these failures lies largely with the federal government. The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA), the government agency charged with safeguarding the health and safety of American workers, was MIA. It needed to and did not issue an emergency order setting forth best workplace practices to address the pandemic. Further, the federal government did not exercise the powers granted to it under the Defense Production Act to ensure an adequate supply and distribution of PPE to transit and other essential workers.

In the face of the federal government's abdication of responsibility, transit agencies were left on their own and the results were accordingly haphazard with, as noted, tragic consequences. To be sure, many transit agencies stepped up to fill the void left by the federal government, but in too many cases they were without the funding, the capability, the knowledge or the willingness to do what needed to be done.

We must ensure that safeguards are put in place to prevent the inadequate provision of PPE and other safeguards in the future. We must also ensure through federal policy that all workers are covered by paid sick and family leave policies and that hazard pay is provided to essential workers like transit operators in this or future public health crises.

"If we truly value our essential workers, including our transit family, we need to take action now and invest in the future of public transportation to ensure that the health and well-being are a priority, that all our passengers have affordable, reliable, and equal access to public transportation service," [Clint Sobratti](#) noted.

Investing in sustainable transit is a powerful way to support unionized workers, not only as drivers but also as manufacturers. [Steven McCauley](#) and [Cevin Carlson](#) spoke about their jobs manufacturing electric buses and passenger rail cars for public transit agencies—both of whom are represented by unions, either the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) or International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 11, and covered by a collective bargaining agreement.

Public transportation is a [\\$74 billion industry](#) that employs more than 435,000 people. The industry is funded primarily by federal, state, and local dollars. This is, of course, all taxpayer money and the government has an obligation to us to ensure that the money is spent in a way that benefits us in terms of quality, value, efficiency, and co-benefits like job creation. Procurement policies are an excellent tool to ensure that the money we spend to buy passenger and school buses and railcars benefit communities in the broadest possible way.

These policies can and should include strong and enforceable domestic content provisions, targeted and, where appropriate, local hire and other quality job standards like training programs, advancement opportunities, family-sustaining wages, and benefits. LA Metro, for example, used the U.S. Employment Plan—pioneered by Jobs to Move America—for the purchase of the electric buses that [Steven McCauley](#) and his fellow workers manufacture at the Lancaster, California, Build Your Dreams (BYD) electric bus manufacturing plant. McCauley also lifted up the diversity of the workers in his plant and in general of “the American workforce” while highlighting the camaraderie among his fellow members of SMART (International Association of Sheet Metal, Air and Transportation Workers), Local 105. In addition to negotiating wages and benefits, SMART has implemented an apprenticeship program for electric bus technicians who have just graduated its first class. These standards were encouraged by LA’s procurement policy. LA Metro used that same policy for the purchase of passenger rail cars at the Kinkisharyo plant where Cevin Carlson works.

The State of California has enacted a Buy Fair, Buy Clean, Buy America law that is another model aimed at maximizing the co-benefits of governmental procurement. It will be critically important for federal, state and local governments to maximize the benefits of their transit purchases by including inclusive procurement policies, like those described in our research and findings.

As discussed more fully in the Climate and Environmental Justice section, we must electrify our transportation sector to have any hope of meeting our climate goals. An important and relatively simple step to do just that is to begin the transition of diesel school and passenger buses to zero emissions. In the long run, Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) buses are less expensive than diesel buses, and although the purchase price continues to be greater, the differential is narrowing steadily and ahead of projections. There are [a number of financing mechanisms](#) to address the upfront cost differences. It is important, however, to emphasize policy tools to preserve, protect and create quality new jobs through the transition.

As noted, ZEV buses are less expensive than diesel buses over their operational life span because of the significant savings in fuel costs (electricity versus gas) and maintenance. ZEV buses have fewer parts and are accordingly cheaper to maintain. In order to be successful, legislative efforts should include job protections for transit workers who operate and maintain diesel buses (both school and passenger). Such protections include appropriate training, guarantees the work won’t be subcontracted to private firms, and job security language.

Similar concerns need to be addressed for manufacturing employees. The manufacture of electric buses also takes fewer workers than for diesel buses. At the same time, there will be new jobs created to manufacture and operate (fuel) electric buses. For workers who lose jobs in diesel bus manufacturing and for the communities in which they work and live, a suite of just transition policies must be enacted; for a fuller discussion, see [“Workers and Communities in Transition: A Report of the Just Transition Listening Project](#)”. As we fully electrify our transportation system, this will be even more necessary; internal combustion engine assembly and manufacturing and even gas stations will ultimately be phased out. We do not discuss these issues here, but it is an issue that will demand further research and action.

For new work and new jobs, we must implement inclusive procurement policies that incentivize for:

- Domestic job creation in the assembly of ZEV buses and manufacture of their component parts along the full supply chain, including batteries;
- Incentives to manufacturers who adhere to quality job standards: wages and benefits; training and advancement opportunities; labor peace/community benefits agreements so that all employees have a full, free, and fair opportunity to form a union and engage in collective bargaining;
- Targeted hire provisions to create opportunities for disadvantaged workers including veterans, returning citizens, women, non-native English speakers, members of overburdened and underserved communities, etc.

Similar provisions should apply to the manufacture, installation, and maintenance of electric charging infrastructure.

Finally, for construction projects, governmental agencies should seek to protect and further their proprietary interests in the project and where it is determined that these would be advanced by the use of a project labor/community benefits agreement, it should require the use of the same by all contractors.

Taxis are a highly regulated industry: the number of vehicles, licensing of drivers, condition of cars and vans are all determined by local governments. Currently, however, taxis are competing with so-called rideshare companies like Uber and Lyft. Not only is this fundamentally unfair, there are grave consequences in terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, worker standards, and congestion.

There are a number of options to address this growing problem. [Barry Taranto](#) suggested municipalization of the taxi industry. This would have the advantage of treating transit and taxis as part of one whole: taxis could be seen as a part of the solution to the persistent “first mile/last mile” problem. Whether this solution or some other is pursued, it is clear that rideshare companies must be regulated and covered by employment laws, including the National Labor Relations Act.

More policy solutions with regards to jobs and workers’ rights are covered in the Conclusion.

Climate and Environmental Justice

Transportation is the [largest and fastest growing contributor](#) to GHG emissions in the U.S., with transportation responsible for 28 percent of emissions in 2018, and increasing 23 percent between 1990 and 2018. The growth in transportation emissions and pollution is driven by too many [vehicle miles traveled](#) (VMT) by too many polluting cars, a consequence of a transportation system over-reliant on personal vehicles fueled by fossil fuels.

Transportation is also a leading source of other dangerous toxic pollutants such as nitrogen oxides (NOx), which have serious health effects and [disproportionately impact](#) Black, Brown, and low-

income communities. But with the proposal of the American Jobs Plan and other recent developments in the Biden Administration, such as the appointment of longtime union member and former Chair of the Climate Cities Initiative Marty Walsh as Secretary of the Department of Labor, and the creation of an Inter-Agency Task Force on Climate Change headed by former Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy, the Transit Equity Network feels newly optimistic that the federal government will take transportation and infrastructure projects—run on renewable energy and paving the way for good union jobs—more seriously than any other administration.

We heard from testifiers who have seen how manufacturing jobs in clean energy for transit can empower communities economically and ecologically. We recognize we have a unique opportunity as the Transit Equity Network to continue organizing around our [principles](#) and to influence a Build Back “Even” Better strategy that includes significant investment in transit.

Existing Inequities

Carbon emissions lower [73 percent](#) by subway usage alone when compared to driving a car and [over four billion gallons of gasoline](#) are saved on a yearly basis when public transportation is an accessible option.

Transitioning to electric transit alternatives is an important and bold step towards clean and renewable sources of energy. We must work to shift the status quo from our polluting transportation systems to ones that are accessible, reliable and powered by renewable energy for the well-being of current and future generations.

As [Kenneth Kirk](#) reminded us, public transit is one of the most effective ways individuals can help reduce GHG emissions. Since “a bus will emit 80% less carbon dioxide” than cars and a “bus can carry at least 50 passengers, while most people drive in cars alone,” if people rode buses rather than drive in their individual vehicles, we would see a significant reduction in emissions.

[Jacqui Patterson](#), director of the Environmental and Climate Justice Program of the NAACP, recalls her childhood growing up on the south side of Chicago, next to a multi-lane highway and railroad tracks. She talked about how common it was in her community to have asthma. “I just remember all the kids who had to carry an inhaler to school. Now I tie that to the exposure that they had to these cars and trucks that were going by, and the amount of pollution that those trains were likely putting in our communities in a way that we were never conscious of.”

She described her prior work with a project called Reach, which looked at the impact of air pollution on communities living near highways and juxtaposed it to the lack of access to adequate transportation in the communities most adversely impacted by pollution. For example, buses would go through communities of color and low-wealth communities, sometimes idling their engines and exposing residents to diesel fumes, but not stopping there to provide transportation access.

[Audrey Wennink](#) pointed out that fewer than ten percent of Americans lived within walking distance of a bus or train that comes once every 15 minutes or less, leaving people no choice but to rely on

cars. “That’s a major reason transportation is the top source of greenhouse gas emissions in the United States,” she added.

She said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has performed [studies](#) showing public transit to be a top public health solution. It provides people with safe access to jobs, school, healthy food, and health care. It also reduces several health risk factors, such as motor vehicle crashes, air pollution and physical inactivity.

Rapidly switching to personal electric vehicles is not necessarily the only answer to the climate and environmental impacts of transportation either, as [Sally Gellert](#) explained, because “too much demand for electricity too soon means that we would need to generate that electricity with poison power, often generated in environmental justice communities.”

While the testimony above illustrated how expanded use of transit can reduce GHGs and other pollution and help to mitigate the climate crises, it is clear transit systems need to switch to electric buses to eliminate their climate and air pollution. They also need to adapt to the ongoing reality of climate change, in ways that undo racial, economic and other inequities.

“Buses powered by fossil fuels emit particulate matter, volatile organic compounds, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides,” said [Elizabeth Chun Hye Lee](#). She talked about how studies link vehicle pollution to adverse impacts on “nearly every organ system in the body,” and how this is “particularly disconcerting when we think of school buses.” She also speaks of how her daughter is one of 25 million students nationwide who would ride the school bus each day prior to the pandemic, and how 90 percent of these are diesel buses. “(S)tudies have shown that children riding school buses are five to 15 times more exposed to toxins than the rest of the population, and it leads to increases in asthma rates, respiratory illness, and impairs cognitive and behavioral development and can even impact classroom performance,” she said.

[Molly Robinson](#), a graduate student worker and member of United Auto Workers Local 2865 at the University of California Berkeley, shared how risky it was to wait at bus stops in highly polluted conditions during the wildfire season, underscoring the critical importance of reliable transit. She said that some of her fellow passengers on the bus lacked shelter and rode the bus to escape the dangerous air quality outside. “The wildfires are a local instance of the global climate crisis, and public transit needs to not only function reliably during a transition to clean energy, but to be a cornerstone of the solution at the municipal, state and national levels,” she added.

Another dangerous impact of climate change is extreme summer heat. [Ryan Pollock](#) from Austin, Texas, an organizer with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 520, testified about the discriminatory lack of shelters at bus stops outside the downtown core frequented by wealthy residents and tourists, and the infrequent and unreliable bus schedules, which often mean “you’re standing out there for a half hour to catch your bus just in the sun in the Texas heat.”

Policy Solutions

The testifiers were passionate in their reimagining of a society where public transit is run on renewable energy while empowering communities economically. Many such policy solutions came from those who spoke on this subject.

[Cevin Carlson](#) gave a glowing testimonial of how infrastructure projects for public transit can empower communities both economically and ecologically. “I build light rail vehicles for LA Metro, so my trains are actually all electric.” He added that Kinkisharyo brought more than 350 jobs to Lancaster, California, “and we’re still counting.”

[Clint Sobratti](#), added that he strongly supports “expanding both rail and transit operating systems by adding a dedicated lane in all the largest cities in the state of Maryland. Statistics in a recent article from a Journal of Advanced Transportation show that having a private bus lane could reduce delays related to gridlock traffic by as much as 66.4 percent. Additionally, having a private bus lane can motivate residents to utilize the transit system as their main source of transportation to and from other desired location destinations, which will in return generate cash flow into our local economy.”

While noting “(t)he good news is that zero emission vehicles and electric vehicles can eliminate tailpipe pollution entirely and have significantly lower global warming emissions than busses powered by fossil fuels, [Elizabeth Chun Hye Lee](#) said, “To make our public transit safe for the planet, we must have the electricity grid to run on electric renewable energy like wind and solar. To do this, I urge President Biden, Congress, governors, state and municipal leaders to prioritize funding for zero emission in electric school busses and busses, clean transit and expansion of equitable transit systems throughout the U.S.”

[Onyinye Alheri](#) wrapped up her testimony by:

“asking all stakeholders at the local, state and federal level to please use the power that the people have delegated to you to move forward the demands of citizens and not private interests. Do whatever you can to ensure that everyone is able to get to where they need to go on time, whether that is work, to receive medical care, to get groceries, whatever the case may be. Please ensure that there is enough funding to create and maintain sustainable public transit systems so that our busses and railways are affordable and reliable in rural, suburban and urban communities.”

The enactment of the American Rescue Plan just weeks after the community hearing is a win for transit riders and workers. [Felicia Park Rogers](#) with Tri-State Transportation Campaign in New York, New York, leveraged her testimony at our hearing to call “on Congress to pass the American Rescue Plan” and added “APTA, the American Public Transportation Association, not known for making wild demands, has estimated that if we do not receive 39 billion dollars in federal relief funds for transit to get through the year 2023, we may not ever be able to restore pre-pandemic levels of service. This would lead to industry-wide job cuts, losing good-paying jobs for tens of thousands in the industry,

as well as terribly exasperating and onerous commutes for essential workers, possibly even making it impossible for millions of people to access work at all, and it would lead to an increase in car use, creating worse congestion and more air pollution.”

The proposed American Jobs Plan includes [\\$85 billion that would go toward the modernization](#) of transit agencies,” meaning both maintaining existing transit infrastructure and expanding service to bring “bus, bus rapid transit, and rail service to communities and neighborhoods across the country.” The Transit Equity Network feels optimistic about the possibilities of this level of allocated funding toward public transportation projects, especially as it promises a system built on regenerative energy.

During her closing presentation, American Federation of Teachers President [Randi Weingarten](#) tied the social isolation of COVID-19 to lack of transit and light rail, especially within rural areas. President Weingarten, whose union recently endorsed the Green New Deal and the THRIVE Agenda, talked about the need for revamping transit systems not just for mass accessibility but to support climate. “There is an opportunity here as well. It’s not just new jobs but it’s also revamping them in a way that we can reduce our carbon footprint,” President Weingarten recounted that AFT’s pension system was a foundational investor in the modernization of LaGuardia Airport, an effort recognized for its transition to renewable energy “and the jobs that came about from building all of that.”

With a conscientious attempt at ensuring that expansion of public transit systems run on renewable energy and workers have access to good jobs, pensions and benefits that a union can help secure, alongside training for those who are transitioning out of antiquated systems at the risk of losing their current jobs, we believe it is possible to achieve a society where transit equity is the norm and not an aspiration.

Conclusion

A number of recurrent themes emerged from [hearing testimony](#)—many focusing on public transit as a lifeline for people to be able to access jobs, education, medical care and other essentials, if they have access to it. Too many people in the U.S. have no access to public transportation that is frequent enough to rely on, or sometimes, no access at all. And the familiar dividing lines of race, class, and disability play a large role in shaping who has access to reliable transit, and who doesn’t. Particularly, there is a large unmet need for meaningful public transportation options for residents of rural communities.

The sense of collectivity that public transit creates is one of the most meaningful benefits of public transit that many of the testifiers touched on. Buses and subways are shared public spaces where people interact, as against being in the isolation of their own vehicles. Expanding public transit ridership and reducing our dependence on personal vehicles would contribute to reimagining our society to be less individualistic and more based on mutuality and solidarity.

Several transit workers testified about their jobs and working conditions. All of them worked directly for a public agency. As we build our more perfect transit system, we should be vigilant in avoiding any attempts at privatization and public-private partnerships. Transit is a public good and should be treated as such, including ensuring that its services are performed by public employees.

And we must keep emphasizing, as promised by Secretary Buttigieg and respected on Rosa Parks' birthday by a multitude of local and federal legislators around the country, the importance of transit equity. As Baltimore, Maryland, transit rider [Sefu Chikelu](#) said, transit equity "means not only being able to get to places quickly, efficiently and on time, but it also means getting to know your city." Public transit is a civil right—and funding and decision making with regard to transit systems must always consider transit equity as a central vision.

We heard from workers in sectors other than transit, such as teachers and postal workers, who depend on reliable and affordable transit to get to work, underscoring the importance of transit to workers.

A critical part of keeping the future of our transportation system under public control is to resist the incursion of rideshare companies who misclassify their workers as independent contractors and lobby to exempt themselves from regulation, as some of the testifiers observed.

Two pieces of proposed federal legislation would help address the obstacles facing workers trying to form a union. The PRO Act would amend the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which covers a significant percentage of private sector workers. [The Public Service Freedom to Negotiate](#) that would extend collective bargaining rights to all state and local governmental employees.

Transit and its adjacent industries are relatively highly unionized; these workers have successfully negotiated family-sustaining wages and benefits, job security, training opportunities, and protections against arbitrary treatment. They employ a large number of workers, many of them people of color. Manufacturing buses, trains—and other equipment for transit—and building transit infrastructure such as subway lines and bus stops, also have the potential to create a multitude of good union jobs.

But we can do much better. Expanded investment in transit has the potential to rebuild our manufacturing base, return work that has been off-shored, and create new industries. It would not only benefit transit workers and those in manufacturing but also communities that lack adequate transit service, where workers, students and the unemployed are at risk financially without these services. Decarbonizing our transportation system—including transitioning to zero emissions passenger and school buses—can create thousands of new jobs in manufacturing (including batteries) and in installation and maintenance of electric charging infrastructure.

In order to realize the full potential for quality job creation from transit investment, we will need intentional policy intervention. The testimonies we heard highlighted a number of policy tools that should guide our approach to protecting and expanding workers' rights.

Increased investment is the starting point for building a transit workers' rights platform. As we continue to battle the pandemic, the accompanying economic slow down and the decline in ridership, the need will only increase. Before the 2020 and 2021 rounds of recovery spending that were either fully enacted or proposed without advancing to the White House (the CARES Act, the HEROES Act, December package, and the American Rescue Plan), transit systems were on the verge of collapse. To be sure, this injection of funds averted layoffs, but they did not address the backlog of repairs faced by many systems or the need to expand transit across the country. The American Jobs Plan provides a newly imagined vision for transit, one which the surface transportation reauthorization can build on. Key to that vision is the direct connection between transit investment and job creation. The quality of the jobs we create—the dividends we earn—from these investments will be determined by specific policies like those we discuss throughout this paper.

Robust public transit has large climate and environmental benefits. And shifting to a public transit system run on renewable energy has the potential to make a significant economic difference in our society when it comes to new jobs and just transition, as we discuss in detail in the Jobs and Workers' Rights section.

Our current infrastructure causes over-reliance on personal vehicle ownership and an ever-expanding highway network. Government funding subsidizes this imbalance by prioritizing highways with 80 percent of federal surface transportation infrastructure funding, historically leaving only 20 percent for all other transportation infrastructure projects, especially public transit. Besides failing to provide adequate transportation access to those who cannot afford to own vehicles or who cannot operate vehicles because of age and disability, it burdens communities, especially Black, Brown and low-income communities with pollution.

Many testifiers spoke about the incidence of respiratory illnesses, such as asthma, in their communities because of high levels of pollution. They remind us of how our transportation system generates growing greenhouse gas emissions, threatening the future of humanity. Once again, not everyone is equally affected. Longstanding inequalities of race and class are determinants of who is most harmed by the frequent heat waves, wildfires, hurricanes and floods that have become commonplace today.

All of these issues intersect. We cannot adequately address transportation GHG emissions and pollution without dealing with the highly unequal impacts of race and class. The solution would have to include expansion of affordable and reliable transit for underserved communities, reversing the inequities in access to transit.

It would also include electrifying bus fleets with electricity powered by renewable energy, and building the needed charging infrastructure, thereby addressing environmental racism and the climate crisis and creating ample jobs. The challenge is to ensure that these are jobs that offer liveable wages, healthcare coverage, hazard pay and workers compensation and pensions—benefits that only membership with a union can help to ensure. We heard inspiring stories from union workers about successful organizing and good jobs in electric bus manufacturing facilities. A green economy for transit is possible.

As we wrote this report, we very directly experienced the intersecting nature of these issues. Testimony we quoted in the section on climate and environmental justice could just as easily have been in the section on racial equity. We intentionally discussed two major workers' rights victories in the section on climate and environmental justice, because we thought they belonged there as much as in the workers' rights section.

A clear explanation of how all of these issues intersect came from [Steven Hamm](#), who pointed out how increased investment in public transit would reduce the barriers that keep certain neighborhoods—especially communities of color—poor. This investment would create good jobs and reduce transportation emissions, all at the same time.

One overarching conclusion comes to mind: That in order for our movements to win on racial and economic justice, climate and environmental justice, and workers' rights, we must build coalitions that break down silos and work on all of these intertwining issues together, a theme that several testifiers touched on. Steve Ongerth, a ferry deckhand and member of the Bay Area Industrial Workers of the World and Inlandboatman's Union says:

“The takeaway is that coalitions of unions, transit activists, frontline communities, transit workers, environmental activists and the like working together can bring about transit equity, and we have examples to back this up.”

As much of the testimony addressed the serious lack of transit funding, it became extremely palpable how lack of these funds to successfully operate and sustain jobs has incapacitated public transportation for years and the disparities were grossly aggravated by the pandemic.

As we heal from the devastation of COVID-19, the American Jobs Plan would secure [\\$621 billion for transportation infrastructure](#)—funds that would aid in reconstruction of roads and bridges as well as funds for ports, airports, and development of electric automobiles.

This includes \$85 billion to modernize current transit systems and assist agencies with ridership expansion. Redevelopment of rapid transit busses, busses, trains and rail systems in general, ensures safe transit alternatives that are dependable, effective and environmentally conscious. Shifting to clean and renewable energy in transit systems will also broaden and create thriving good paying employment opportunities. Another \$174 billion will go to electrifying vehicles, including the replacement of 50,000 diesel buses with electric buses, and electrifying 20 percent of the school bus fleet.

We need more than just transit workers and riders to mobilize and advocate for transit equity and investment in public transit. Lack of resources is not a valid excuse. Since March 2020, when the pandemic affected nationwide shutdowns in the U.S., billionaires in the United States gained [\\$1.3 trillion](#). While millions lost their health and livelihoods, and more than half a million lost their lives, America's 657 billionaires continued to accrue wealth. The resources to invest in the future exist—we need to build the political will to harness them.

The rise in billionaire wealth during the pandemic came up as an issue in the Hearing. [Drew Van](#), an active transit organizer from Oakland and former bus operator from AC Transit and ATU Local 192 clearly states, “You know, we could even just see in the last period, billionaires around the world have made, I think, a trillion dollars in additional wealth since the pandemic started.”

Deep-seated underinvestment in our infrastructure and public transportation systems is detrimental and it has significantly and negatively impacted all of us on a local, state and federal level. As we recuperate from the lethal outbreak, a disastrous financial crisis, and have a long-overdue conversation regarding racial equity in public transit settings, Americans must compel and demand funding that capacitates and strengthens public transit systems.

[Steve Ongerth](#) offers keen and insightful solutions to confront this issue at hand:

“We need to duplicate these efforts wherever public transit exists and wherever more public transit is needed. That’s why events like Transit Equity Day are an essential part of making that happen, and we need to change the paradigm going from transit unions and transit agencies constantly fighting for scraps of funding to making it the priority, because this really should be the major mode of transit.”

Systemic solutions and long lasting change happen when the community inquires and mobilizes.

[Jacqui Patterson](#) notes, “We all know the false solutions that are out there, whether it’s market based solutions, whether it’s not having communities at the front lines of the changes that we need. We want to move towards electrification, but we want to do that in a community informed way.”

As Ms. Patterson makes clear, the existing inequities of transit, exacerbated but not exclusive to the COVID-19 pandemic, will absolutely require community-informed advocacy. The crisis of the American public transportation system does not have a one-stop policy solution. However, thanks to the collective vision of transit equity so clearly articulated by the testifiers, decision-makers are duty-bound to heed these lessons and transform the vision of a reliable, sustainable, and equitable transit system into a new reality. Transit equity is essential—for its builders, its workers, its riders, and its community—and deserves to be treated (and funded) as such.

FREQUENTLY USED ACRONYMS

ATU Amalgamated Transit Union

BYD Build Your Dreams (Electric Bus Manufacturing)

GHG Greenhouse Gas(es)

PPE Personal Protective Equipment

SMART International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers

TWU Transport Workers Union of America

UMW United Methodist Women

VMT Vehicle Miles Traveled

ZEV Zero Emission Vehicle

INDEX OF CITED TESTIFIERS

Affiliations listed for testifiers are for personal reference only and may or may not represent the views of their respective organizations or unions.

- [David Peter Alan](#), transit advocate, South Orange, New Jersey
- [Onyinye Alheri](#), Baltimore People's Climate Movement, Baltimore, Maryland
- [Jovanka Beckles](#), activist, San Francisco, California
- [Cevin Carlson](#), Quality Inspector, Kinkisharyo International, Union Steward, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 11, Lancaster, California
- [Sefu Chikelu](#), transit rider, Baltimore, Maryland
- [Patricia Fedewa](#), transit rider and advocate, Detroit, Michigan
- [Samantha Garcia](#), transit rider, Albuquerque, New Mexico
- [Sally Gellert](#), transit rider of the Lackawanna Coalition in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey
- [Crystal Greenberg](#), registered nurse, Baltimore, Maryland
- [Steven Hamm](#), TWU Local 229; President, Hudson County, New Jersey chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute
- [Salvador Herrera](#), Director of Organizing, International Painters and Allied Trades District Council 88
- [Mahdi Hosseini](#), Youth Organizer, Together4Brothers, Albuquerque, New Mexico
- [Simon Husted](#), Buffalo Transit Riders United, New York
- [Elizabeth Chun Hye Lee](#), United Methodist Women, New York, New York
- [Nancy Jackman](#), transit mobility instructor, Duluth, Minnesota
- [Stan Jones](#), Transport Workers Union of America Local 320, San Francisco, California
- [Zach Karnazes](#), disabled riders activist, San Francisco, California
- [Celia Keenan-Bolger](#), Tony-award winning actor, New York City, New York
- [Kenneth Kirk](#), International Secretary-Treasurer, Amalgamated Transit Union
- [Stephen McCauley](#), Material Specialist, Build Your Dreams Electric Bus Manufacturing, member, SMART Local 105, Lancaster, California
- [Ryan McGraw](#), paratransit advocate, Healthcare Community Organizer, Access Living, Chicago, Illinois
- [Laurel Mendes](#), disability rider advocate, Baltimore, Maryland
- [Jeffrey Omura](#), actor, New York, New York
- [Steve Ongerth](#), Bay Area Industrial Workers of the World, Berkeley, California

- [Shivani Parikh](#), Outreach Coordinator, Asian communities, Center for Safety and Change, Rockland County, New York
- [Felicia Park-Rodgers](#), Tri-State Transportation Campaign in New York, New York
- [Jacqui Patterson](#), Director of the Environmental and Climate Justice Program, NAACP
- [Sister Barbara Pfarr](#), Catholic Nun, Elm Grove, Wisconsin
- [Bob Planthold](#), transit rider and advocate, San Francisco
- [Ryan Pollock](#), International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 520, Austin, Texas
- [Julie Reiskin](#), Executive Director, Colorado Cross Disability Coalition
- [Molly Robinson](#), United Auto Workers Local 2865, Berkeley, California
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- [Barry Taranto](#), San Francisco Taxi Workers Alliance, San Francisco, California
- [Igor Tregub](#), Sierra Club, San Francisco Bay Chapters, Berkeley, California
- [Drew Van](#), transit organizer, retired bus operator, AC Transit; retired member of ATU Local 192
- [President Randi Weingarten](#), American Federation of Teachers, Washington, D.C.
- [Audrey Wennink](#), Director of Transportation for Metropolitan Planning Council, Chicago, Illinois
- [Carl Williams](#), President, Lawndale Federation of Classified Employees-AFT, Lawndale, California
- [Howard Wong](#), retired architect, Past President, International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers Local 21, San Francisco, California
- [Kathi Zoern](#), transit rider, activist, Wausau, Wisconsin

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Hearing Facilitators

Listed in order of appearance at the [Community Hearing on Transit Equity](#) on February 3 and February 4, 2021.

Guest Facilitators

Alfred P. Kielwasser, Jean Su, Sunyoung Yang, Thea Lee, Denise Abdul Rahman, Denise Diaz, Ozawa Bineshi Albert, Dany Sigwalt, Regina Eberhart

Internal Facilitators

Laura Wiens, Erica Dodt, Bill Washburn, Nicole Wong, Christopher Ramirez, Gail Francis, Basav Sen, Nancy Smith

Learn about the facilitators [here](#).

Hearing Moderators

Michael Leon Guerrero, Executive Director, Labor Network for Sustainability
Jane English, Program Manager, Environmental and Climate Justice Program, NAACP

Recordings and Transcripts

- For quick access to testimony both from the Community Hearing livestream and pre-recorded testimonies, visit [Youtube](#).
- For transcripts, access the digest of the Community Hearing [here](#).

Community Hearing on Transit Equity Sponsors

Special thank you to the Amalgamated Transit Union, American Postal Workers Union, Institute for Policy Studies, Labor Network for Sustainability, NAACP, Sierra Club, Together4Brothers, Transit Riders of the United States Together, and Transport Workers Union and all of the more than 90 sponsors, see all of the sponsors [here](#).

¹ In 2018, the Transit Equity Network established Rosa Parks' birthday, which is February 4, as Transit Equity Day. That same year, however, February 4 fell on a Sunday so Transit Equity Day actions were held on Monday, February 5. Source: [Labor Network for Sustainability](#).

² For example, in Baltimore, about 30% of households do not have a car. [Vital Signs](#) by the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance at the University of Baltimore.

³ In fact, one of the lessons learned was the need for accommodations in holding and convening virtual meetings.

⁴ Jeremy Brecher, author of ["Strike! Commentaries on Solidarity and Survival,"](#) frequently refers to the economic devastation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing shutdown of businesses, job loss and lack of emergency funding in a timely manner as the "Coronavirus Depression."

⁵ A Dreamer, also known as 'DREAMer' is a socio-political term referring to immigrant youth who qualify for the Department, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors, also known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Source: [USCIS](#).

⁶ The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) estimates that every \$1 invested in public transportation generates \$5 in economic returns; every \$1 billion invested in public transportation supports and creates approximately 50,000 jobs.