



The Growing Trend of Apprenticeship and Mentorship in Public Transportation

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June 3, 2025

TRB Transportation Workforce Summit

Although apprenticeship programs in the United States have traditionally been used as a training model for occupations in the building trades, apprenticeship is a strategy that works for almost [any occupation](#) and programs have been started in nearly every industry and sector. In 2010, there were only five registered apprenticeship programs for frontline transit occupations. Today, there are over 50 registered apprenticeship programs at over 30 transit agencies. This brief examines mentorship and registered apprenticeship programs in public transportation, including the general structure for various frontline occupations, factors that have contributed to an increase in the use of these strategies, and the benefits that these programs offer for employers and members of their workforce.

Regardless of the occupation, all registered apprenticeship programs must be at least 1 year in length and must meet the required number of hours of related technical instruction and on-the-job learning, facilitated by a mentor. The on-the-job learning component of apprenticeship programs is a key aspect of apprenticeship and what sets it apart from other training programs. Mentors in apprenticeship programs are selected from among the experienced workers to facilitate on-the-job learning. Mentors contribute to the effectiveness of apprenticeship as a strategy because their supervision and guidance allows workers to get hands-on experience and put into practice what they learned in the classroom.

There are several factors that have led public transit agencies to develop and implement apprenticeship and mentorship programs for frontline occupations. Investments from the USDOL have both raised awareness of the strategy among employers and the general public and, in some cases, have provided direct support to employers, offsetting the costs to start and run an apprenticeship program. With a grant from USDOL's American Apprenticeship Initiative program, the International Transportation Learning Center convened working groups of subject-matter experts to develop the framework for several of the most in-demand occupations. These occupational frameworks have been approved by USDOL and pave the way for the development of individual programs. The occupational framework gives transit agencies a template to start from when developing their program and provides the network of apprenticeship agencies, whether run by the state or the federal Office of Apprenticeship, with an industry-approved example to judge programs submitted for registration.

In public transit, apprenticeship programs have been started for occupations in facilities maintenance, railcar maintenance, bus maintenance, bus operations,



elevator/escalator maintenance, and rail electrical systems. For occupations that require intensive training on industry-specific technologies, transit agencies will generally need to develop additional training materials and capacity in order to start an apprenticeship program. For bus operator apprenticeships, however, mentorship is the only new component that generally needs to be added in order to start a registered apprenticeship program. At most transit agencies, the standard training program for new bus operators exceeds 144 hours.

While the investments and resources described above have increased awareness of registered apprenticeship and removed some of the administrative burden to develop these programs, the decision to implement any strategy, especially one that takes some investment, ultimately depends on its long-term sustainability and value for an employer. Apprenticeship programs have the potential to solve many of the challenges that transit agencies face when it comes to managing their frontline workforce.

Transit agencies are facing challenges with recruitment and retention of workers. These challenges are exacerbated by the need for workers with specialized skills and the large percentage of workers eligible for retirement that are leaving the workforce. Apprenticeship programs allow transit agencies to recruit from a wider pool of candidates and are attractive to candidates looking for employment. Apprenticeship programs can also be certified so that veterans can access their GI Bill benefits while in the program.

Apprenticeships can also increase retention rates. [A recent study by the Skills Funding Agency](#) found that 80% of employers reported that their retention rates improved as a result of hiring apprentices and 65% of apprentices stay working for the same company that trained them during their apprenticeship program. The Transit Workforce Center found that transit agencies with [mentorship programs for bus operators](#), whether registered as an apprenticeship program or not, saw higher retention rates and lower rates of absenteeism after implementing the program.

Transit agencies report difficulty finding workers with existing skills that can be applied to occupations, particularly around maintenance and repair of transit equipment. Apprenticeship programs can be uniquely tailored to a [wide range of industry, company, and employee-specific needs](#). Apprenticeship training practices can be adapted to meet the latest certification requirements and equip workers with exactly the skills they will need to be successful on the job.

Apprenticeship programs also help transit agencies navigate the increasing number of retirements among their frontline workers. The structured mentorship in apprenticeship programs allow knowledge transfer from experienced workers and give a new and fulfilling role to workers that may be considering retirement.

The Transit Workforce Center (TWC) has documented the [growing trend of apprenticeship and mentorship](#) and convenes an [apprenticeship network](#) to facilitate knowledge sharing among peers. [TWC works to promote apprenticeship](#) by highlighting the positive experiences of transit agencies across the country, publishing resources and guides, and providing technical assistance.