

# All Aboard: Diversity and Representation In the Public Transit Industry

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**2020 WAS A YEAR OF CHALLENGE** and change for the entire U.S., but the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic downturn and social upheavals of the past year struck U.S. public transit agencies with particular force. According to data from USAFacts, ridership on U.S. transit systems fell by approximately 65 percent compared to 2019, with every agency, supplier, vendor, contractor, designer and consultant dealing with the challenges of the pandemic.

Protests for racial equality across the U.S., however, will perhaps have the greatest impact on public transit agencies over the years ahead. Agencies, and the entire industry, are reassessing how they can leverage their services to have an equitable impact on their communities and reviewing their organizational culture and workforce development to ensure they are talking the talk on equity, diversity and inclusion to reflect the communities they serve—especially at the leadership level.

Public transit agencies in the U.S. have made strides in increasing diversity and representation over the past generation, from the front-line to the c-suite. However, agencies still have more to do to ensure that their boards and executive offices truly reflect the communities they serve.

## Diversity vs. Inclusion

"A lot has changed in the last 20 years," explains Stephanie Wiggins, CEO of Metrolink, Los Angeles, CA. Wiggins assumed the CEO position in January 2019, and now oversees a budget of approximately \$800 million while leading nearly 300 employees on a commuter railroad system encompassing 538 total route miles.

"When I came into the industry, there was not much diversity at all, I saw few people who looked like me, and few women were in decision-making roles. Now, you can see the growth. The fact that I'm in this role is a reflection of growth and representation. I think the difference in the industry now compared to a generation ago is that before, everyone understood the importance of diversity but there wasn't much movement. Today, the transit industry recognizes we have diversity, but we also need inclusion. You need both."

Leslie Richards, general manager of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), notes that in Pennsylvania, the last 20 years have seen substantial growth in diversity in transit and transportation leadership. "Out of 52 Department of Transportation leaders, I was the first woman PennDOT (Pennsylvania Department of Transportation) secretary and served alongside as many as 14 other women. Together, we discussed how to increase diversity since we knew diverse teams and perspectives are critical to the success of our businesses." Richards explains.

"In 2002," she continues, "Faye L.M. Moore was the first woman and African American to serve as SEPTA general manager. Today, in Pennsylvania, we have women leading the major airports and transit agencies in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and the PennDOT secretary is an Iranian American woman."

Wiggins explains that diversity is the fact, while inclusion is the action. Representation is not enough. The assumption that neutrality to race, gender and other factors will clear a path for advancement on merit alone has proved lacking, at best. Agencies must also make certain their organizations—especially at the leadership level—provide ample opportunities for engagement at all levels.



Stephanie Wiggins



Leslie Richards



Mary Toutouchi



2019-20 grads on career track gaining real-world public transportation experience at Metrolink.

Mary Toutouchi, PE, vice president of project and construction management firm Hill International, Inc.'s California rail/transit practice, concurs with Wiggins and Richards. Toutouchi, who came to the U.S. from Iran in the 1980s to study engineering, explains, "In my first class, I was the only woman out of 40 students. Throughout my career, though, I've seen the impact and importance of diversity and inclusion. We have certainly made strides."

Toutouchi has held several senior positions over her career, overseeing the design and construction of a variety of complex transit projects, and notes the steady growth in diversity she saw. She notes that at Hill, as at many other construction management companies, diversity is the norm. But, she adds, there is more to do. "In the private sector, as an industry, we can certainly do better," she says.

## Intentionality is Key

"We still have a way to go," says Wiggins. "There are more African Americans in leadership roles in the industry, and there are now seven African American women leading major transit agencies. Compare this to just two years ago, when there were, perhaps, two African American women leading U.S. rail agencies. But there needs to be momentum to move forward."

According to APTA's own 2020 Public Transportation Fact Book, there are 93 rail agencies in the U.S., along with approximately 1,200 bus systems. So, although any increase in representation at the CEO level is welcome, there is certainly room to improve.

Wiggins explains **intentionality** is the key to realizing this improvement. "Organic change is not going to just happen," she says. "At Metrolink, for example, we're taking a hard look at occupational segregation. In transit, you'll often find over-representation of one gender over another in many occupations. This impacts salary, opportunities for advancement and many other metrics. You see that same imbalance in ethnicity. We have representation and diversity in our front-line employees, but not in management and decision-making roles. This excludes people from positions of higher income and

higher recognition." Having the diversity in number, notes Wiggins, wasn't resulting in diversity of roles. The key to making changes was to consider a myriad of factors—from hiring practices to job descriptions—with the deliberate intention of increasing equity and inclusion.

Wiggins notes that, while serving as deputy CEO of LA Metro, she led a team that looked at ways to increase gender diversity at the agency. In one instance, they uncovered an unintended gender bias in hiring for entry-level maintenance positions. Existing job descriptions asked for experience in a car wash or oil change—two jobs traditionally held by men. By simply broadening the job description to include housekeeping, they were able to exponentially increase applications from more women. "This was transformative," says Wiggins. "Remember, these are positions that lead up to chief of maintenance and similar leadership positions. We achieved this change because we looked at the data with the intention to improve diversity in our hiring."

Being aware of the kind of unconscious bias uncovered in entry-level hiring practices exemplifies the kind of concrete change public transit agencies can enact. "We all have bias," says Wiggins. "Once we are aware of that bias, and how that bias impacts our work every day, we can start to make the intentional changes and policies that make a difference."

SEPTA's Richards offers a similar example of intentionality at work. "Especially today, given that women, especially women of color, have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to help connect women to fulfilling career opportunities. Through our Women in Transit program and Women in Trades Committee, we recruit and advance more women into the transit industry. According to SEPTA's labor market data, there are 5.2 percent women available for skilled craft positions in our labor force, compared to SEPTA's employment utilization of 1.5 percent women in skilled craft positions." Richards notes

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Hill International mentoring students onsite in Boston.

## CONNECTING THE NATION TO VACCINES CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

South Carolina's Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority (The COMET) is transporting local residents to major vaccination sites free of charge. The campaign was developed in partnership with several local organizations. According to John Andoh, The COMET executive director/CEO, "There are people in our community who are most affected by the ravages of COVID-19—especially older adults, the disabled, minorities and the poor. The COMET family of services is here to help."

The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) is offering its employees an incentive payment to get the coronavirus vaccine. The agency will pay employees \$100 after they receive the complete dosage. All employees, except for members of

the general manager team, are eligible.

In Bremerton, WA, a strip mall parking lot owned by Kitsap Transit has become the site of a COVID-19 vaccination clinic run by Peninsula Community Health Services (PCHS). The 105-stall parking lot, bought last year by Kitsap Transit, is primarily used as a park-and-ride for the agency's bus routes. But with bus ridership down because of the pandemic, the agency says it has more than enough room for the clinic and parking for bus riders, according to Executive Director John Clauson. The agency provided the space to PCHS free of charge after Clauson said he heard about the lack of vaccination sites across Kitsap County. "It's space we're not using," he said. "It's a perfect situation for both of us."

director for the Integrated Mobility Division at NCDOT. He added that it is important that the rides are free of charge.

In Orange County, NC, when someone schedules an appointment with the Health Department for a vaccine and needs a ride, Orange County Public Transportation reaches out to schedule the appointment. The agency offers door to door pick-ups.

GoDurham recently began accepting reservations for free rides to vaccination sites. GoDurham ACCESS provides curb-to-curb and door-to-door on-demand service for eligible riders.



In Lake County, OH, Laketrans customers can use local route buses or the agency's door-to-door Dial-a-Ride service. If a vaccination appointment is at a drive-thru site, customers will remain on the same bus for the whole trip. Laketrans transports residents through the entire vaccine process and returns them home.

"We are here to help in any way we can to get our community through this pandemic and move forward," said Laketrans CEO Ben Capelle. "We've responded with our mobile food pantry bus and now we want to make sure every resident has the opportunity to get vaccinated."

As more and more vaccines become available, public transit agencies will need to be flexible and creative in accommodating riders while at the same time practicing safety protocols such as social distancing.



Need a ride to your vaccine appointment? The state may provide that for free

North Carolina DOT and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services are working together to ensure residents have rides to vaccination sites.

"It's important that everyone have equal access to vaccinations," said Ryan Brumfield, interim



Kirtland resident, Jean Harvey took Laketrans to get her first vaccination at the Coulby Park distribution site.

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a key to raising this rate is through proactive outreach: SEPTA has set a goal of 3.7 percent for including women in skilled positions.

Richards continues, "Diversity means many different things. At SEPTA, we have a very diverse workforce. However, like most companies, we want to encourage diversity within the highest ranks, and we want to recruit and retain more diverse talent from the community. This involves applying an equity lens to our hiring and promotion practices." She explains that SEPTA is creating job outreach plans to bridge job categories for underrepresented groups in the greater Philadelphia community that SEPTA serves. "Also," stresses Richards, "we are developing our frontline workers—who are pri-

marily black, Indigenous and people of color—through corporate mentoring and professional skills training so that they can grow within the company."

Like Wiggins' initiatives, these types of targeted steps will result in greater representation over the long-term.

For private firms, says Toutoungi, providing clear and considered paths for underrepresented groups to the board room is also an example of intentionality. Formal and informal mentorships in particular, she explains, can be invaluable in leading promising leaders toward senior management roles in the A/E/C industry. "During the last 20 years, I have been involved in many organizations such as WTS - Orange County, SoCal chapter, (as a mentor), WTS, CMAA and the Railway Association of Southern California

(RASC) are all places where I've been able to make a positive impact on young professionals, especially women entering the industry."

### The Real Benefits of Diversity

In their ongoing annual report on diversity's impact on an organization's bottom line, **Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters**, McKinsey & Company is clear on the outcomes of intentionality: "companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile." For U.S. public transit agencies in 2021, when good stewardship of limited funds is more important than ever, this is a lesson no leadership team can afford to ignore. As Richards puts it, "All the data shows diversity helps your bottom line, gives you better options, and increases your perspectives when addressing challenges."

An example Richards cites is when SEPTA held their first-ever virtual board meetings in 2020 to discuss the "FARE" restructuring plan, which highlighted equity. The virtual format allowed the public to provide comments by phone—creating greater opportunity for input—with an option to share questions and comments in Spanish and Mandarin, as well.

Wiggins agrees, citing her own experience in intentionally considering diversity in business decisions. "If we see a group that is underrepresented in our system, those are our potential riders. Reaching out to local stakeholders in these communities—again, with intention—to ensure they are included in our planning and analyses grows the pie

for everyone. It's not a zero-sum game. To be more diverse doesn't mean you have less service for one group over another."

She adds that including underrepresented groups in decision-making makes agencies more effective and more efficient. "Understanding the experience and the needs of these communities enables us to make better use of the taxpayer dollar," says Wiggins. "Don't forget, lived experience is a data point. Are the projects we deliver meaningful to the communities we serve? Do our projects result in the outcomes we want?"

Wiggins cites station design as one example: considering different gender needs in station and facility design is critical to delivering the experience Metrolink wants for its riders, and consultants that understand this value of inclusion are more likely to deliver a successful project.

### Conclusions

Diverse leadership at transit agencies delivers real, measurable benefits. The industry has made strides in this regard, but there is still work to do. A commitment to a diverse workforce, either for agencies or for private sector companies, is not enough. A transit agency must address diversity with intention. Similarly, Richards adds that in addition to hiring and promoting diverse candidates into key leadership roles, public transit agencies must ensure their entire leadership team prioritizes equity.

2020 provided a clear call to action for public transit agencies and their partners; 2021 offers an opportunity to realize this opportunity.



Metrolink CEO Stephanie Wiggins (second from left) with women engineering staff at Metrolink. Women represent 42 percent of Metrolink staff.