



Transit Watch: Public Transit in Crisis



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Prioritizing vaccines? Think of public transit workers

By Michael Pimentel and Art Aguilar

As the leader of the association representing California's public transit agencies and the head of the state's largest union representing public transit workers, we strongly urge Gov. Newsom and state and local health officials to provide priority access to the COVID-19 vaccine to public transit workers, like individuals age 65 and over and other essential workers in health care, emergency services, food and agriculture, and education.

There is no question that the workers of California's transit agencies are front-line heroes that have gone - and continue to go - to extraordinary lengths to keep Californians most in need moving during the grueling past year of the pandemic.

These workers have kept other essential workers moving - transporting them to their jobs in health care, education, food service and hospitality.

There is also no question that they will play a vital role in the recovery - transporting millions of Californians to get vaccinated and getting our society and economy back on track as we emerge from this horrific year.

Unfortunately, the state's adoption of a new vaccine distribution plan in late January eliminated vaccine prioritization for workers in transportation and logistics, pushing public transit workers to the back of the line.

That's unfair for these workers who have selflessly done their duty, and it's unwise for a state that's trying to get its economy and way of life back on track.

Consider Kenneth Hale and Francisco Rendon. While the majority of their friends and neighbors were safely working from home or sheltering in place, both Mr. Hale and Mr. Rendon showed up to work as a bus operator and a utility worker for Riverside Transit Agency and SunLine Transit Agency, respectively.

Many of today's riders also lack access to a personal automobile.

Like tens of thousands of other public transit workers, Mr. Hale and Mr. Rendon chose to put the needs of their community above their own personal health and safety. They both deserve to be protected from this virus in recognition of their selfless service to others.

Even after more than a year of dealing with the global COVID-19 pandemic, tens of thousands of brave workers like Mr. Hale and Mr. Rendon that service, repair, and operate mass transit vehicles throughout California continue to face difficult conditions as they serve the public.

These workers have kept other essential workers moving - transporting them to their jobs in health care, education, food service and hospitality. Survey data has found that these essential workers are overwhelmingly people of color and/or low-income and simply cannot work from home.

Many of today's riders also lack access to a personal automobile. Additionally, public transit agencies have continued to provide critical paratransit service to elderly and disabled people throughout California, often serving as a lifeline to grocery stores, doctor's appointments, pharmacies, and recreation.

In recent weeks, many of California's public transit agencies have also stepped up to provide free trips to mass vaccination sites, ensuring that communities that have been hardest hit by the pandemic have physical access to these locations, helping ensure equitable distribution of the vaccine.

For many low-income people, disabled people, seniors, communities of color, and essential workers, accessing the vaccine will require a trip on a bus, rail car or paratransit vehicle. In the weeks ahead, public transit agencies will play a critical role in supporting the reopening of schools by transporting millions of students to the classroom.

Public transit workers are interacting daily with the very people the state has elevated for vaccine prioritization. It would be irresponsible for the state to fail to guarantee that those trips are as safe as possible by ensuring transit workers are vaccinated.

We respectfully call on Governor Newsom and state and local health officials to prioritize public transit workers for the COVID-19 vaccine alongside other essential workers.

Editor's Note: Michael Pimentel is executive director of the California Transit Association, representing the state's public transit agencies. Art Aguilar is chairman of the California Conference Board of the ATU, the state's largest union representing public transit agency employees.

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at COVID-19@caltransit.org.