

Hiring and Retention Strategies Whitepaper: A Perspective from Florida Transit Agencies

Florida Statewide Transit Training and Technical Assistance (STTAT) Program

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Introduction

This study was supported by the Florida Statewide Transit Training and Technical Assistance (STTAT) Program in partnership between the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and the Center for Urban Transportation Research (CUTR) at the University of South Florida (USF). With an understanding that hiring and retention have been challenging for many industries, including the transit industry, many agencies have recently made changes to attempt to attract and retain more talented and diverse individuals. In an effort to understand what is being done, what is working, and what still needs to be solved, the research team decided to survey transit agencies throughout the state.

A survey was developed to determine characteristics and details related to the hiring and retention challenges that transit agencies in the state are facing. The survey was distributed to Florida transit agencies in June 2022, resulting in 77 survey responses. A list of these agencies is provided in Table 1. With just over 300 transit agencies in the state, a sample size of 77 respondents provides statistical significance at the 90 percent confidence level with an 8 percent margin of error. In other words, we can be 90 percent certain that the entire population of transit agencies in the state would have similar responses to those received from the survey respondents.

Table 1. Transit Agency Respondent Agencies

Transit Agency Respondent Agencies			
ARC of Martin County/Arc of St. Lucie County	Columbia County Senior Services	Marion Senior Services/Marion Transit	Space Coast Area Transit
Arc on the Gulf, Inc.	Creative Clay, Inc.	McClain Inc	Suwannee River Economic Council (SREC)
Archways, Inc	Miami-Dade Department of Transportation and Public Works	Mid Florida Community Services, Inc.	St Johns County Council on Aging
Brevard Achievement Center (BAC)	Easterseals Florida	MTM Transit, LLC	St Lucie County Area Regional Transit (ART)
Baker County Transportation	Escambia County Area Transit	North Bay Village	Sumter County Transit
BASCA, Inc.	First Transit/Liberty Transit	NW Focal Point Senior Center	Sunrise Community, Inc.
Bay County Board of County Commissioners	Flagler County BOCC	Okaloosa County BCC - EC RIDER	Suwannee Valley Transit Authority (SVTA)
Beacon College	Gulf Coast Jewish Family and Community Services	Operation PAR, Inc.	The Arc of Putnam
Big Bend Transit	Hillsborough Transit Authority (HART)	Osceola Council on Aging	The Arc of The Glades
Boley Centers Inc.	Henderson Behavioral Health	Palm Tran	The Opportunity Center
Brevard Alzheimer's Foundation Inc.	Hillsborough County Sunshine Line	Parc	TheBus (Hernando County)

Transit Agency Respondent Agencies			
Building Blocks Ministries	Jacksonville Transportation Authority (JTA)	Pasco County Public Transportation	Transportation - Broward County
Charlotte County Transit	JTrans	Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA)	TriCounty Community Council
Citrus Connection	Key Training Center	Pyramid Inc	UCP of Miami
Citrus County Transit	Lake County Transit Management	Regional Transit System - City of Gainesville	Vincent House
City of Gulfport	Lee County Transit	Sarasota County Area Transit	Votran
City of Key West/Key West Transit	Levy BoCC/Levy County Transit	Space Coast Area Transit (SCAT)	Wakulla Transportation
City of Ocala (SunTran)	Lighthouse for the Visually Impaired and Blind	SCCIL d/b/a Resource Center for Disability Solutions	
City Of Tallahassee/StarMetro	LYNX-Central Florida Regional Transportation	Senior Resource Association	
Collier Area Transit	Manatee County Public Works	Seniors First Inc.	

Survey Analysis

Overview

Transit agency representatives were asked what type of transit service their agency provides. Figure 1 displays the share of respondent agencies that provides various types of transit services such as paratransit, fixed route, in-house maintenance, Medicaid services, and more. Paratransit services are the most common type of service provided by survey respondents, followed by fixed route. Agency respondents were able to select all services that they provide; therefore, the sum of the total responses is greater than 100 percent.

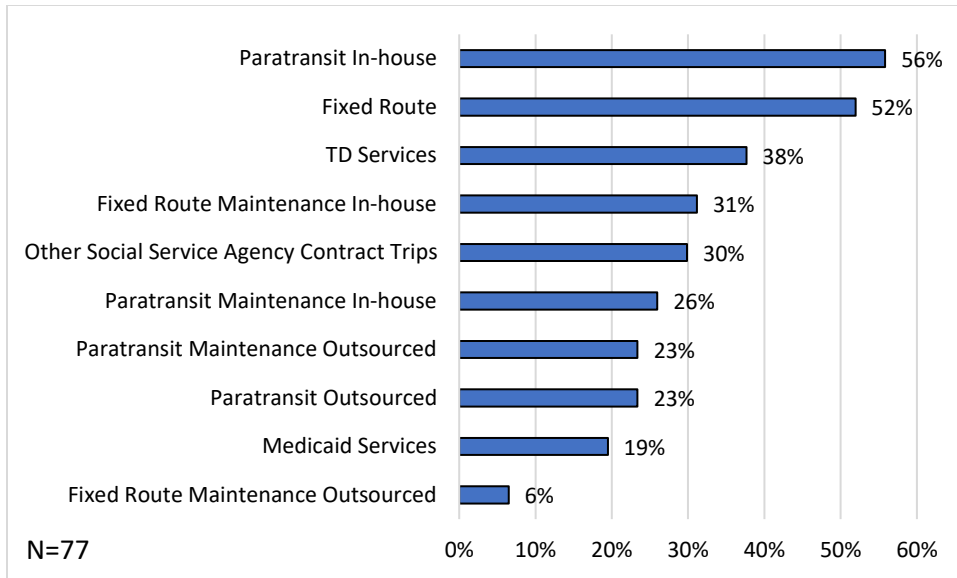


Figure 1. Type of transportation services provided by survey respondents

Vacancy Overview

The type of service provided was examined by the type of funding received, as shown in Figure 2. Urbanized area formula 5307 grants provide funding to public transit systems in Urbanized Areas (UZA) for public capital, planning, job access and reverse commute projects, as well as operating expenses in certain circumstances. Rural area formula 5311 grants provide capital, planning, and operating assistance to states to support public transportation in rural areas with populations less than 50,000, where many residents often rely on public transit to reach their destinations. Section 5310 funding for the enhanced mobility of seniors and individuals with disabilities provides formula funding to states for the purpose of assisting private nonprofit groups in meeting transportation needs of the elderly and persons with disabilities.¹ While 100 percent of transit agencies that receive 5307 funding provide fixed route service, only 10 percent of 5307 agencies provide Medicaid services. Alternatively, 23 percent of all 5311 and 23 percent of 5310-only agencies provide Medicaid services. In-house paratransit services are the most common service type for 5311 and 5310-only funded agencies. If an agency receives more than one type of funding, the highest level of funding is the default. Meaning, if an agency receives both 5307 and 5311 funding, the agency is categorized as a 5307 funded agency. Agencies listed as receiving 5310 funding, only receive 5310 funding.

¹ <https://www.transit.dot.gov/grants>

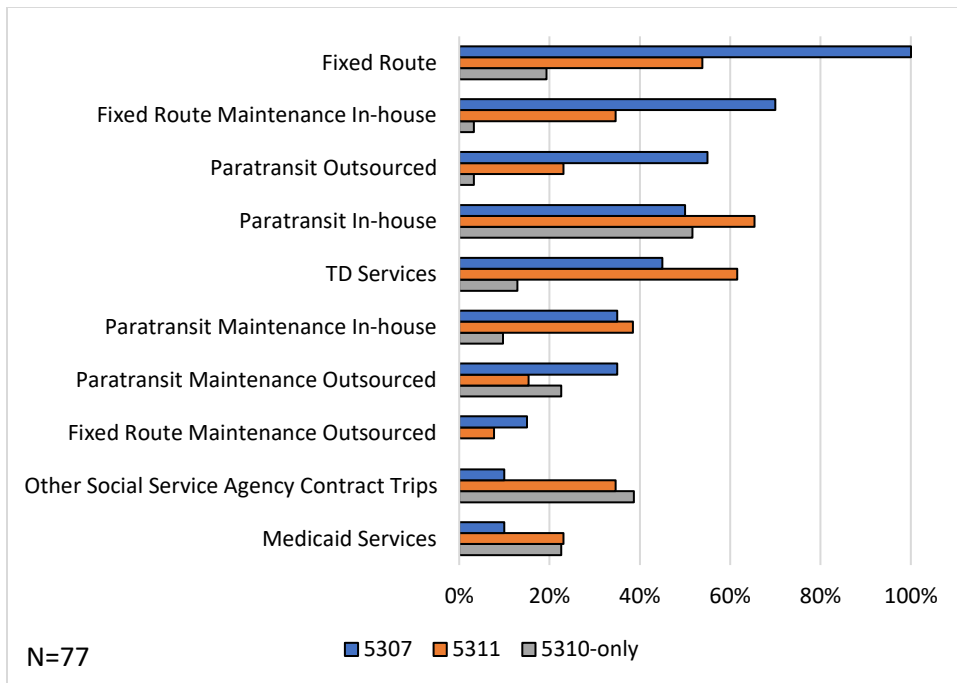


Figure 2. Service provided by funding type

Vacancy by Department

When asked which departments within their agency currently have vacancies, respondents revealed that paratransit operators are in need at 62 percent of the respondent agencies, fixed route operators are in need at 47 percent, and administrative staff are needed at 40 percent of the respondent agencies. Additionally, 27 percent of the respondents need technicians, 18 percent have vacancies in their finance department, and 15 percent need planners, as shown in Figure 3. The “other” category in Figure 3 is inclusive of mental health technicians, dispatch, teaching artists, and unidentified needed positions.

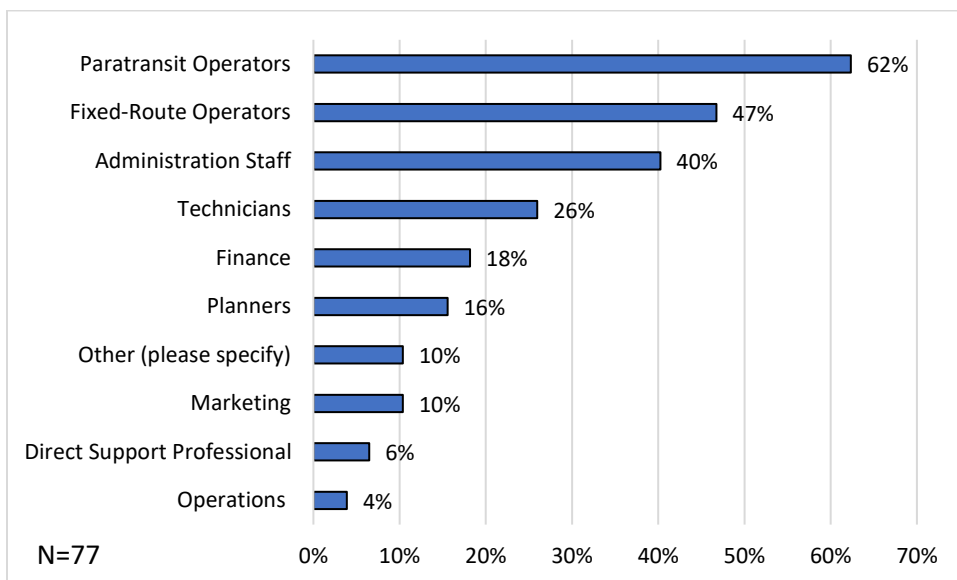


Figure 3. Departments with current vacancies (as of June 2022)

When the vacancies by department are examined based on the type of funding source the agency receives, some notable differences arise. Agencies that receive 5307 funding have vacancies in fixed-route operators, followed by technicians, and paratransit operators as shown in Figure 4.

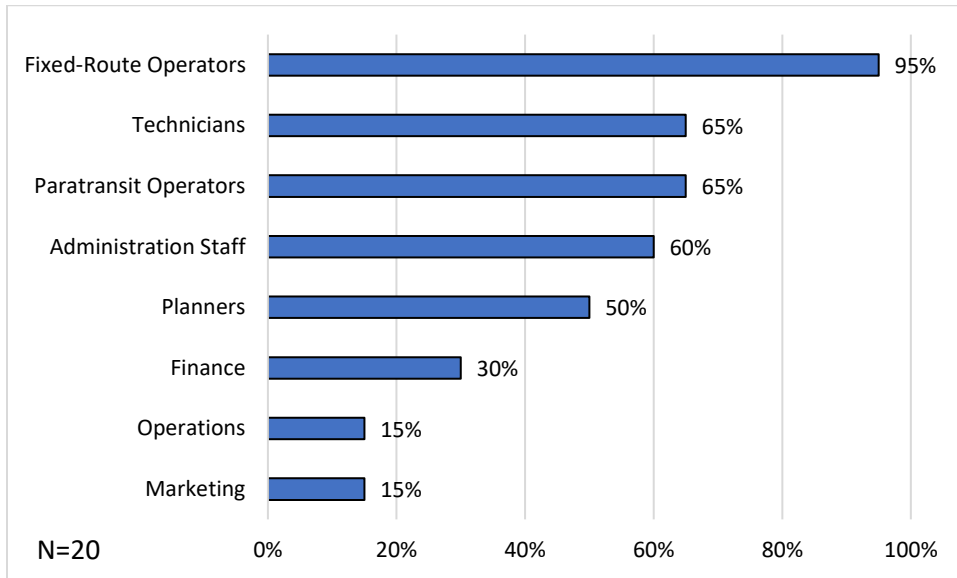


Figure 4. Vacancies in departments in 5307 funded agencies

Somewhat different from 5307 funded counterparts, the agencies that receive 5311 funding have vacancies in paratransit operators followed by fixed-route operators and administration staff as shown in Figure 5.

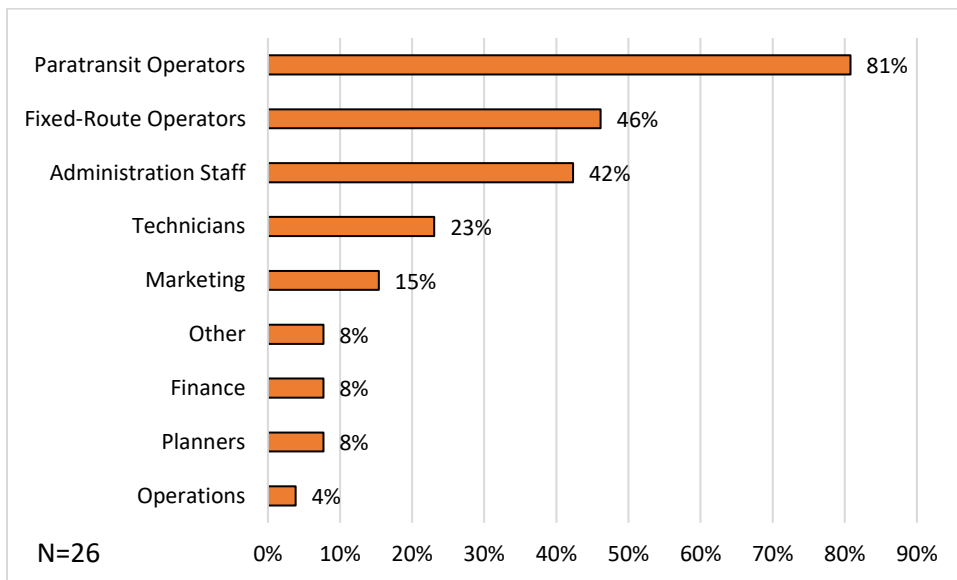


Figure 5. Vacancies in departments in 5311 funded agencies

When examining the 5310-only funded agency departments with vacancies, paratransit operators top the list, followed by administrative staff as shown in Figure 6.

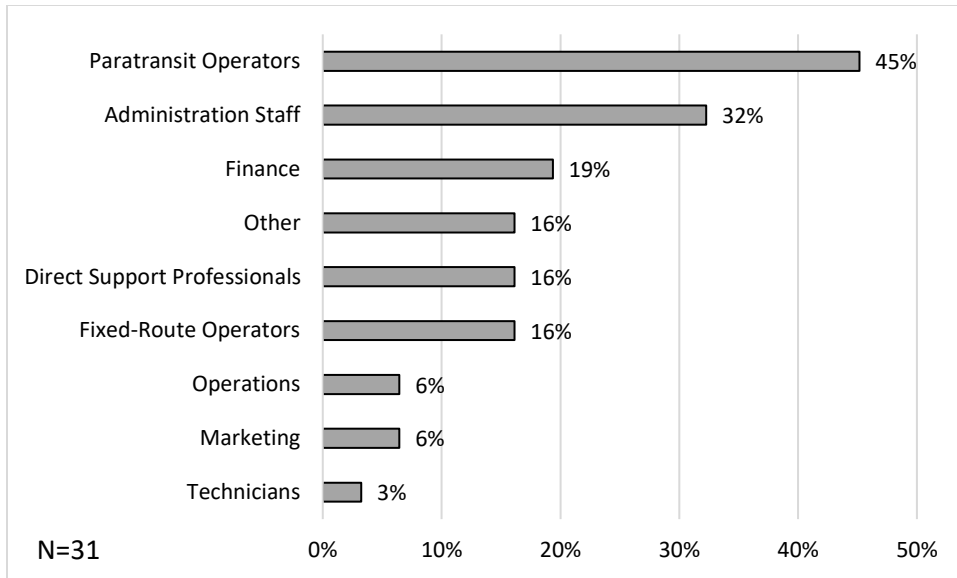


Figure 6. Vacancies in departments in 5310-only funded agencies

With the understanding that many agencies are struggling to fill more than one vacancy in multiple departments, agency respondents were asked to rank the departments that they identified from the greatest need to fill vacancies to the lowest need. This ranking identifies the most crucial roles that agencies are currently looking to fill. Figure 7 shows the vacancy rankings with paratransit operators ranked as the highest need, followed by fixed route operators, administration staff, and technicians, similar to the order of needs provided in Figure 3.

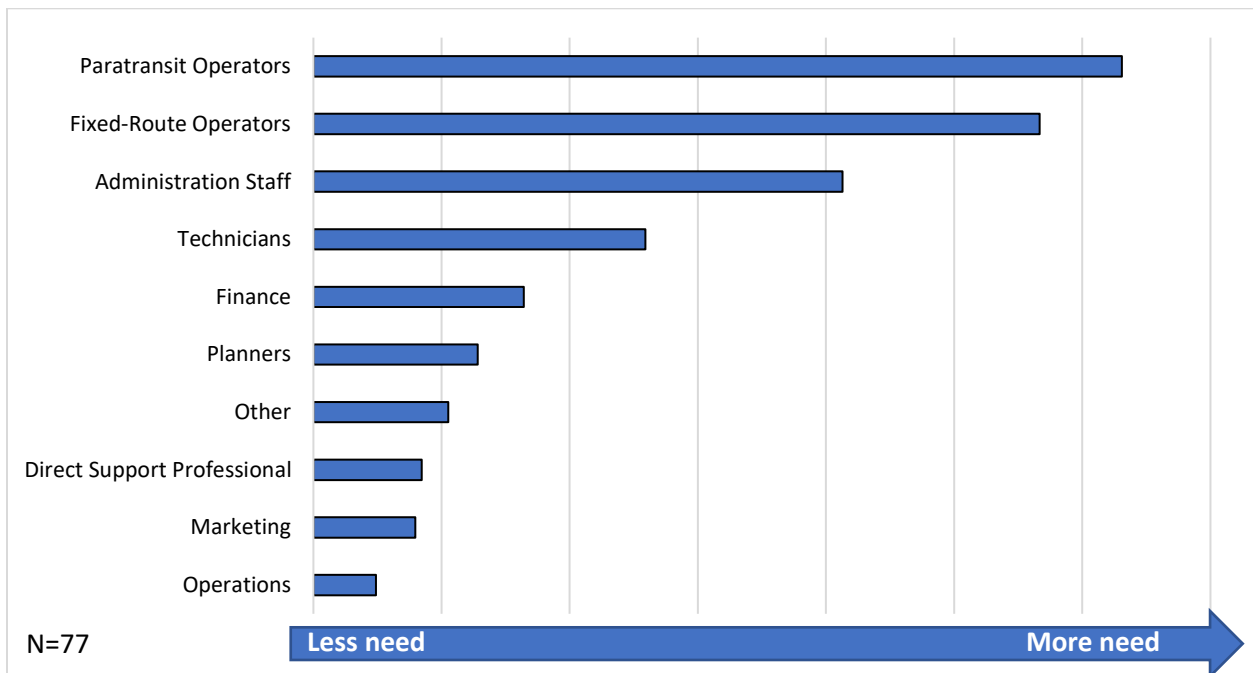


Figure 7. Departments ranked by need to fill vacancies

When the vacancy rankings are presented by the type of funding received, 5307 funded agencies (Figure 8) rank fixed-route operators as most needed, followed by paratransit operators and technicians, very similar to the vacancies shown in Figure 4. Marketing is the lowest-ranked need for 5307 funded agencies.

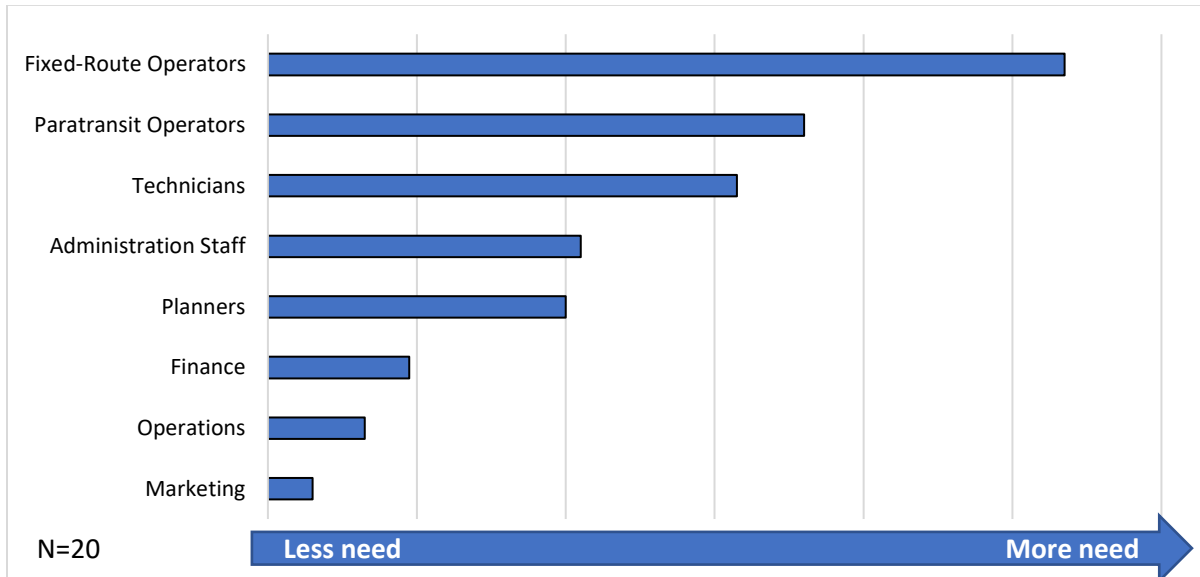


Figure 8. Departments ranked by need to fill vacancies at 5307 funded agencies

When the vacancy rankings are presented by the type of funding received, 5311 funded agencies (Figure 9) rank paratransit operators as most needed, followed by fixed-route operators and administrative staff, very similar to the vacancies shown in Figure 5. Finance is the lowest ranked need for 5311 funded agencies.

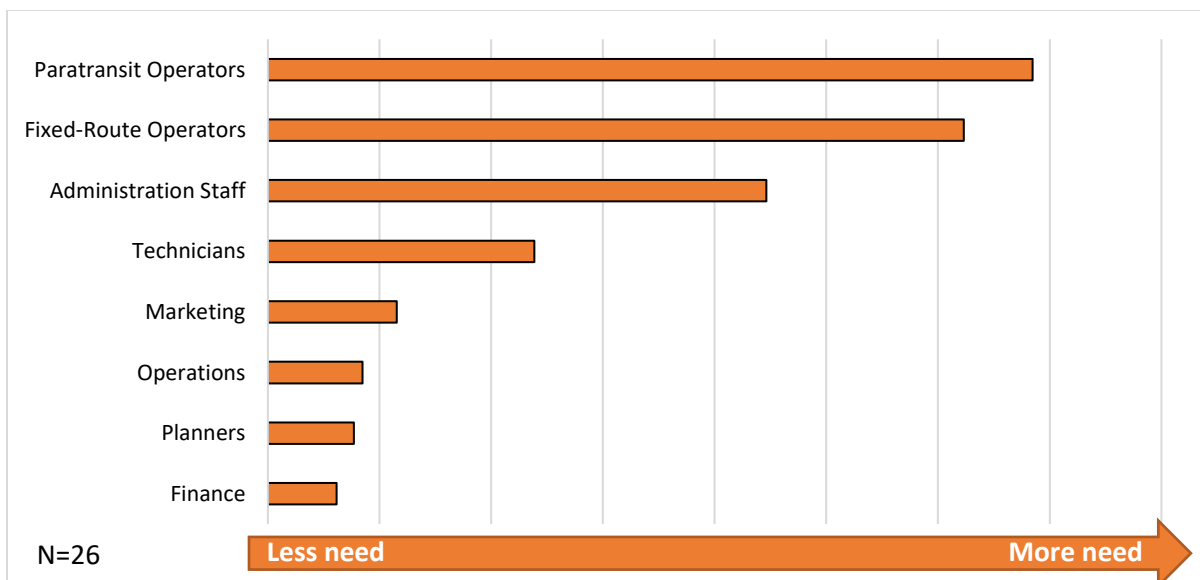


Figure 9. Departments ranked by need to fill vacancies at 5311 funded agencies

When the vacancy rankings are presented by the type of funding received, 5310-only funded agencies (Figure 10) rank paratransit operators as most needed, followed by administrative staff and finance, very similar to the vacancies shown in Figure 6. Technicians are the lowest ranked need for 5310-only funded agencies.

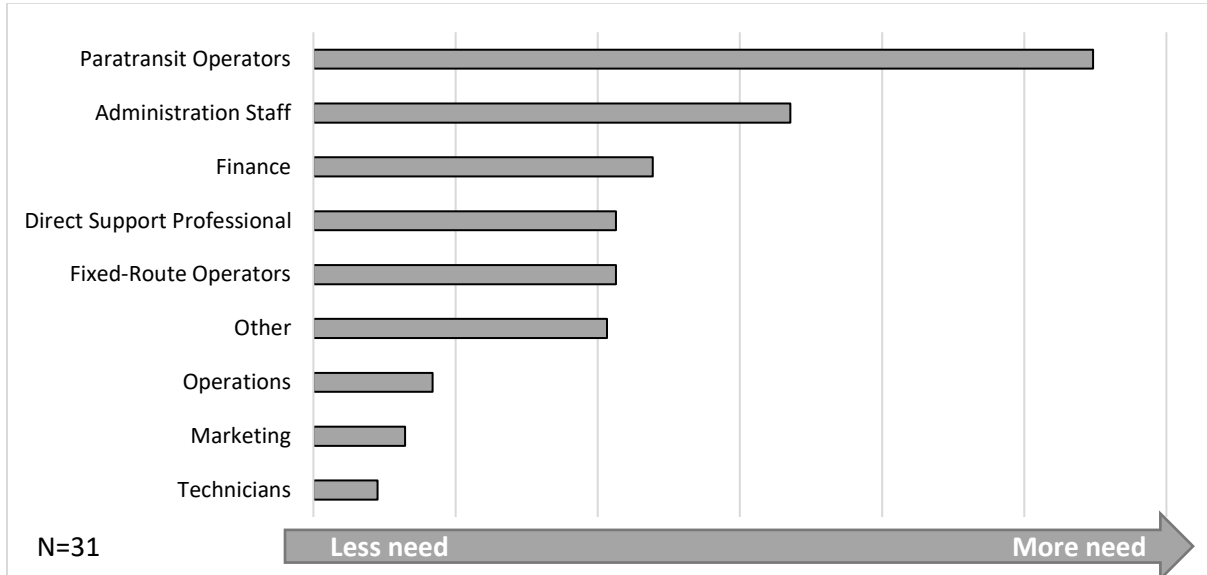


Figure 10. Departments ranked by need to fill vacancies at 5310-only funded agencies

Position Turnover

Agencies were also asked to identify the departments within their agencies that have the highest turnover rates. Agencies were allowed to pick more than one department, therefore the sum of the shares shown in Figure 11 is greater than 100 percent.

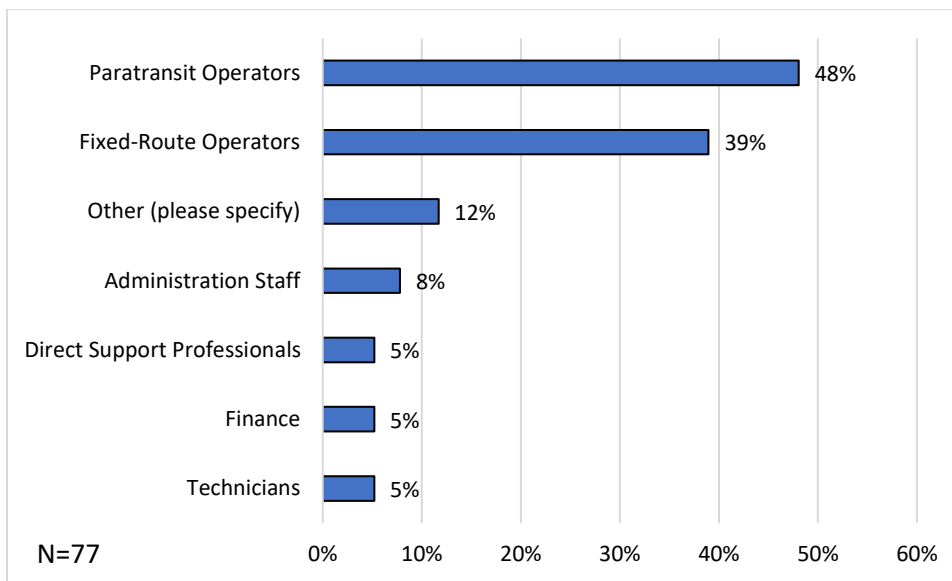


Figure 11. Departments with the highest turnover rates

When turnover rates are examined by agency funding source, it is clear that fixed-route operators have the highest turnover rate for 5307 funded agencies as shown in Figure 12.

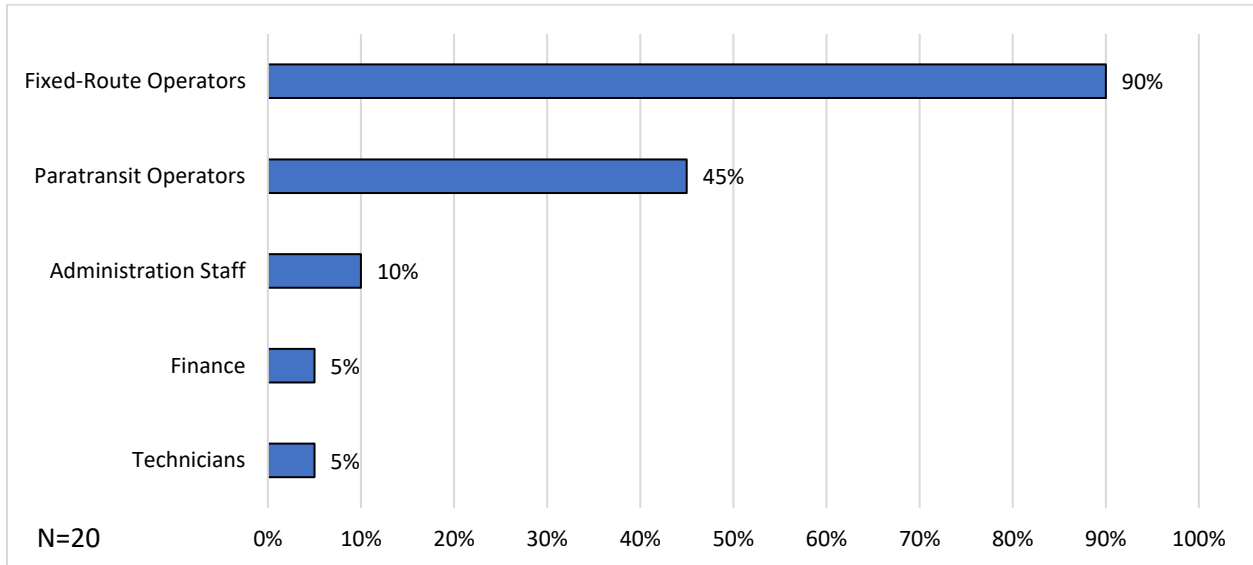


Figure 12. Departments with the highest turnover rates at 5307 funded agencies

When turnover rates are examined by agency funding source, it is clear that paratransit operators and fixed-route operators have the highest turnover rates for 5311 funded agencies as shown in Figure 13.

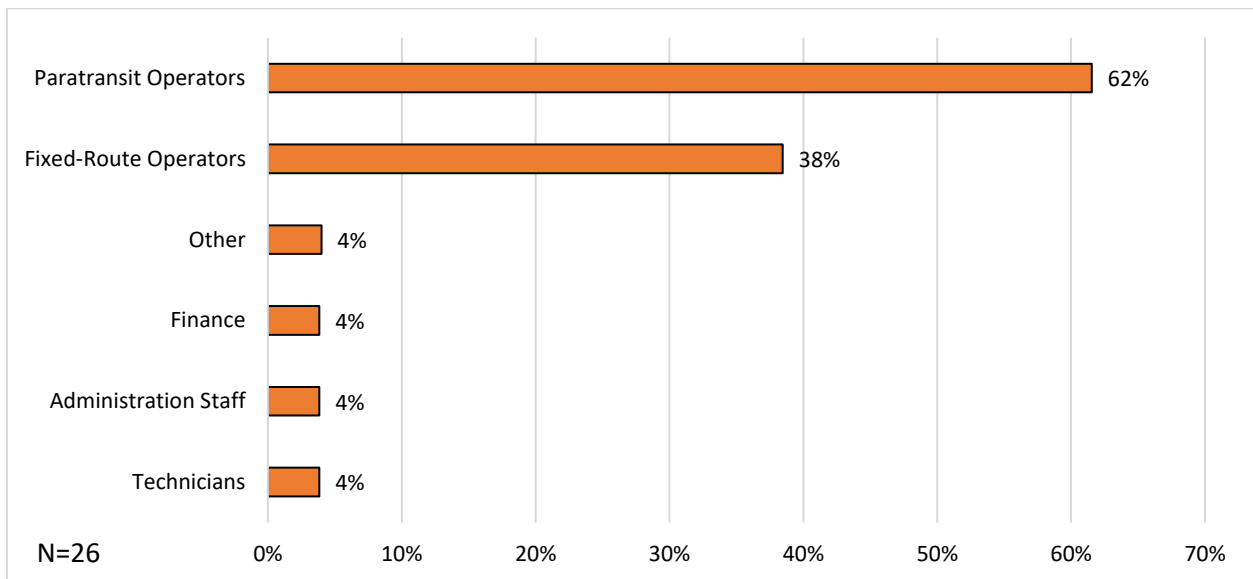


Figure 13. Departments with the highest turnover rates at 5311 funded agencies

When turnover rates are examined by agency funding source, it is clear that paratransit operators and direct support professionals have the highest turnover rates for 5310-only funded agencies as shown in Figure 14.

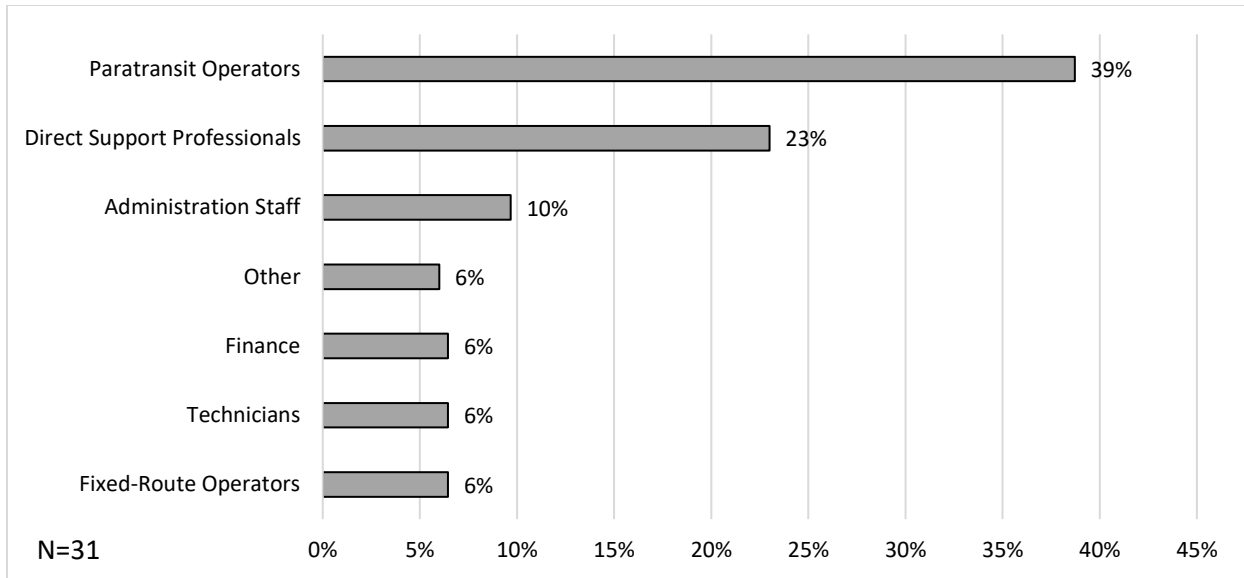


Figure 14. Departments with the highest turnover rates at 5310-only funded agencies

Departure Interviews

In an effort to gain an understanding of why employees choose to leave an agency, respondents were asked if they survey employees prior to their departure. Figure 15 shows that 86 percent of respondents do meet with their employees prior to departure.

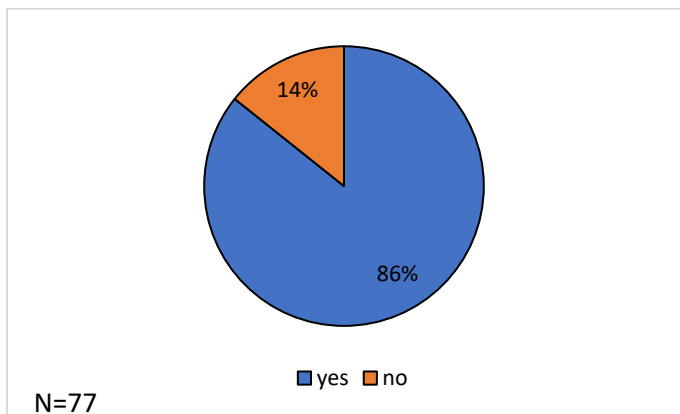


Figure 15. Agencies meet with their employees prior to their departure

Those agencies that meet with their employees prior to departure were then asked to identify the reasons that most employees indicated their desire to leave their agency. Respondents were able to provide multiple reasons; therefore, the sum of the responses is greater than 100 percent. As shown in Figure 16, the majority of the respondent agencies, 73 percent, indicated that salary was the driving force behind the employee's departure. Additionally, 37 percent of respondents indicated that retirement was the reason the employee left, which is not too surprising given the age profile of the state of Florida. It is also worth noting that no agencies identified passenger-related issues as a reason for employee departure.

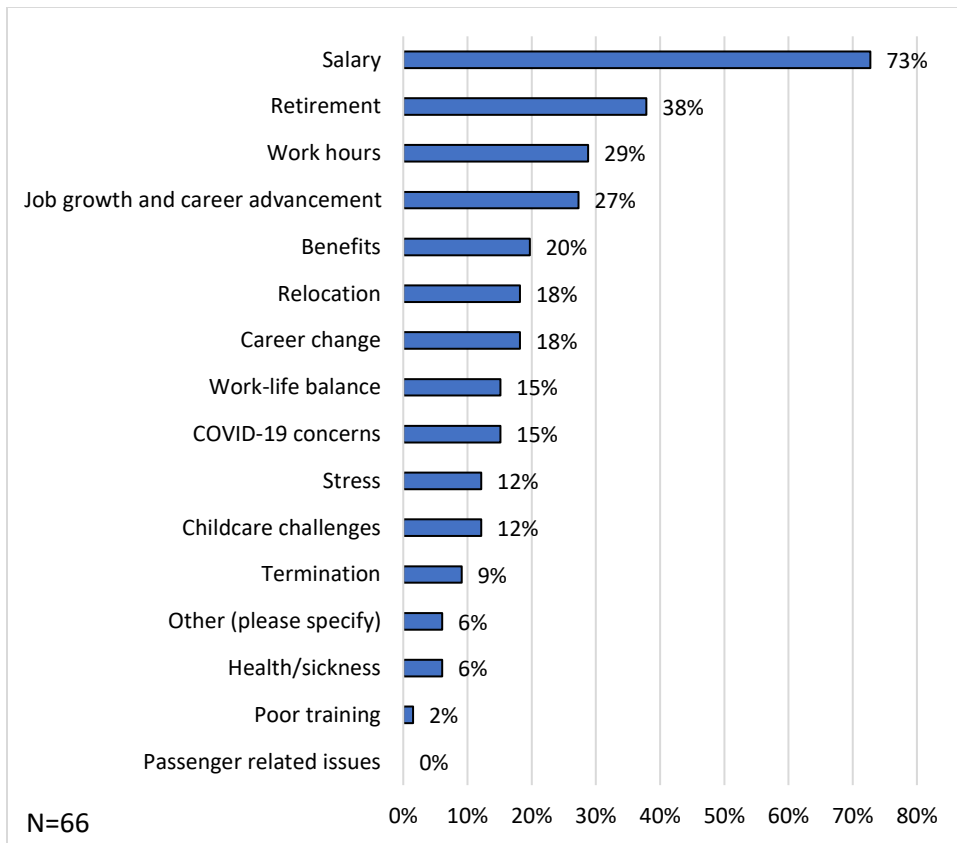


Figure 16. Indicated reasons for employee departure

Agencies were subsequently asked to identify only the top reason for employee departure, based on the indicated reasons they selected previously. One agency used the “other” category to select two reasons; therefore, the sum of the shares totals 102 percent rather than 100 percent as shown in Figure 17.

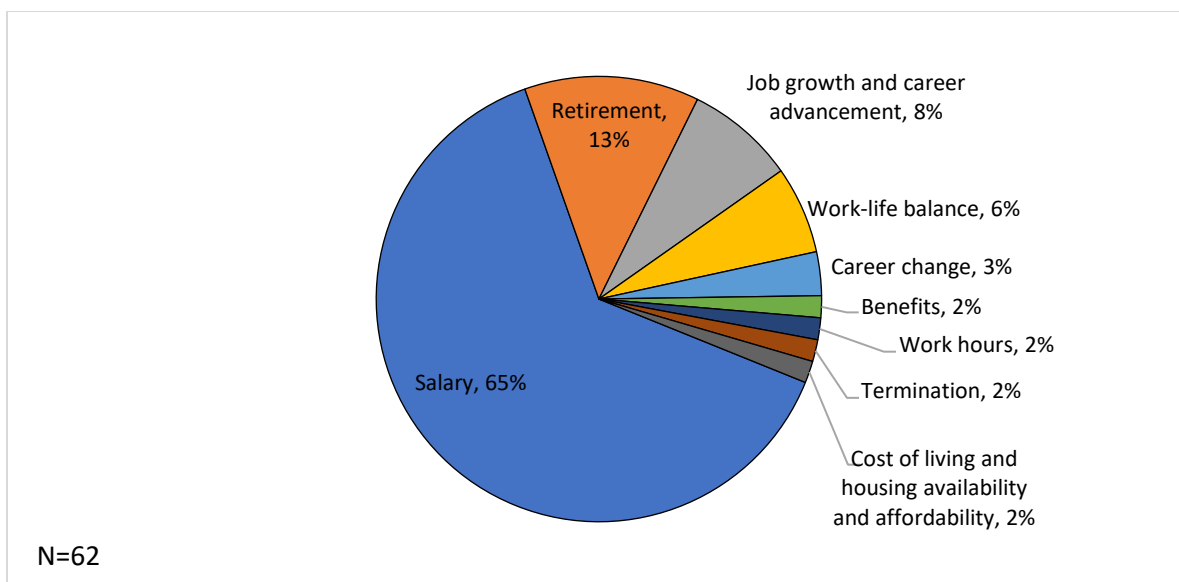


Figure 17. Most common reason for employee departure

Respondents were asked if potential applicants indicate why they declined the job opportunity. More than half, 56 percent of respondent agencies indicated that they do know why potential applicants have declined the offer as shown in Figure 18.

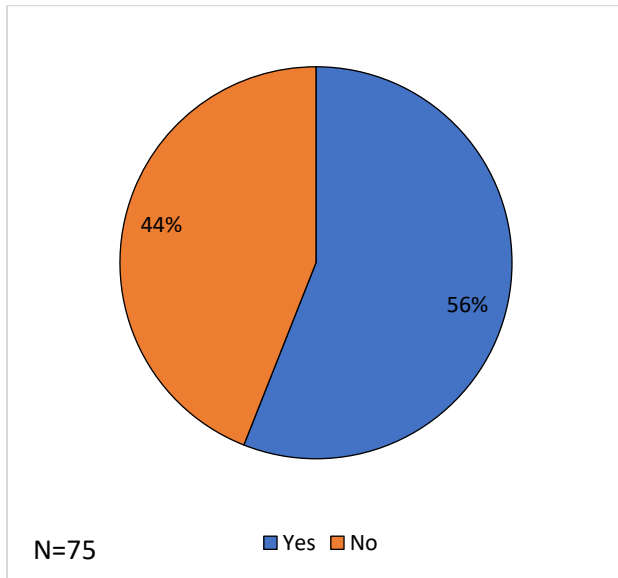


Figure 18. Potential applicants indicate reasons for declining job

The main reason that prospective employees decline a job offer is salary, as identified in Figure 19, with 71 percent of respondents indicating salary was the prominent refusal factor. The next most influential reason was the amount of time that lapses between hiring and the start date, at 10 percent of respondents.

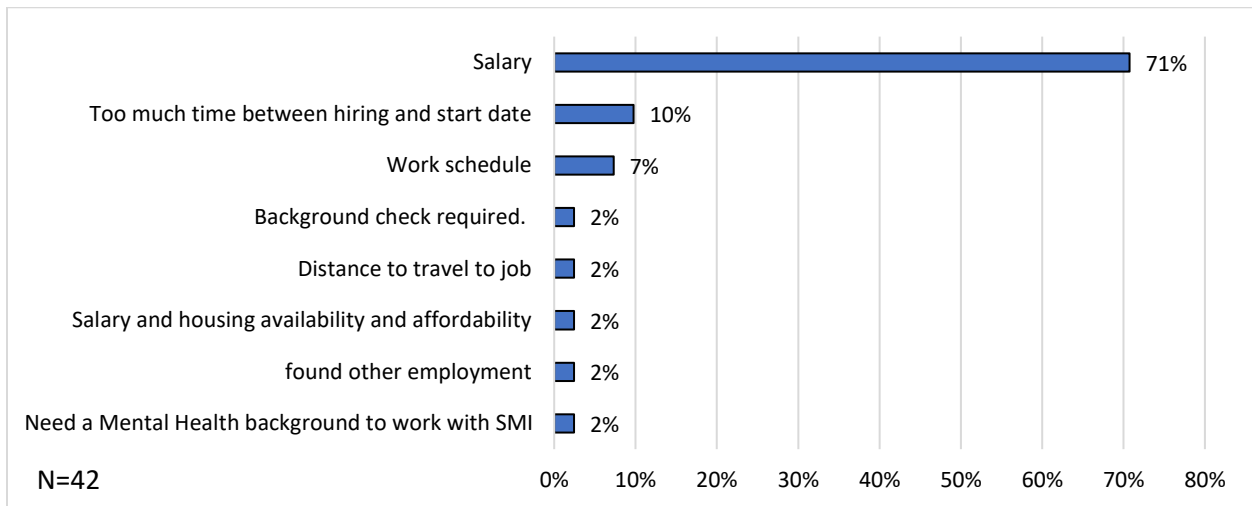


Figure 19. Reason for declining job offer

Strategies to Assist with Hiring

Many transit agencies throughout the state are using social media to advertise their employment opportunities, with 65 percent of respondents indicating they use social media as a strategy to assist with hiring. Additionally, 64 percent are using an online employee hiring platform like Glassdoor or

Indeed. Partnerships with career resource centers and participation in job fairs round out all the top strategies used by more than half of the respondent agencies as shown in Figure 20.

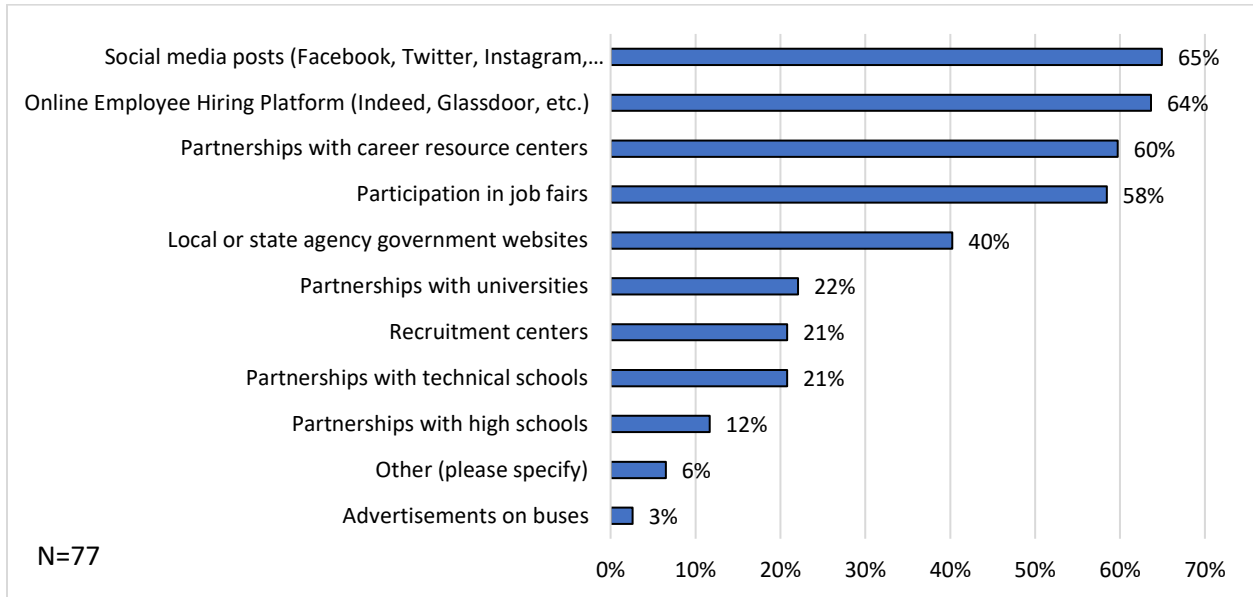


Figure 20. Strategies used to assist with hiring

Agency respondents were asked if their agency has successfully implemented any recruitment practices, with 47 percent indicating that they have implemented recruitment practices, as shown in Figure 21. Figure 22 displays the shares of various types of recruitment practices that were identified as successfully used. The most common reported recruitment practice is the use of hiring bonuses.

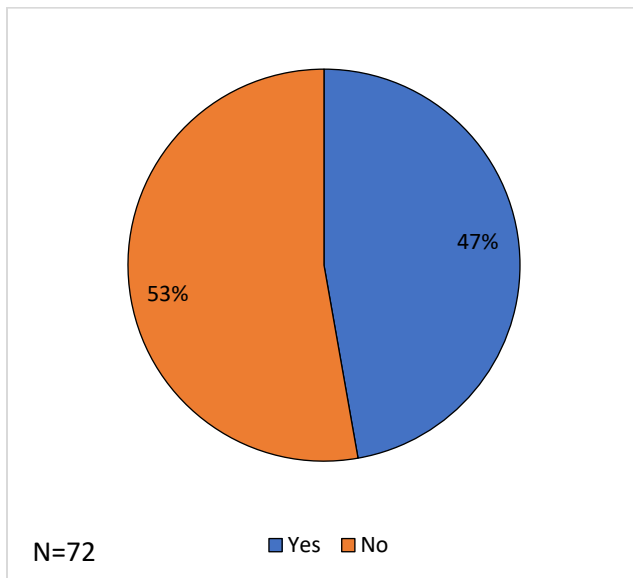


Figure 21. Recruitment practices implemented

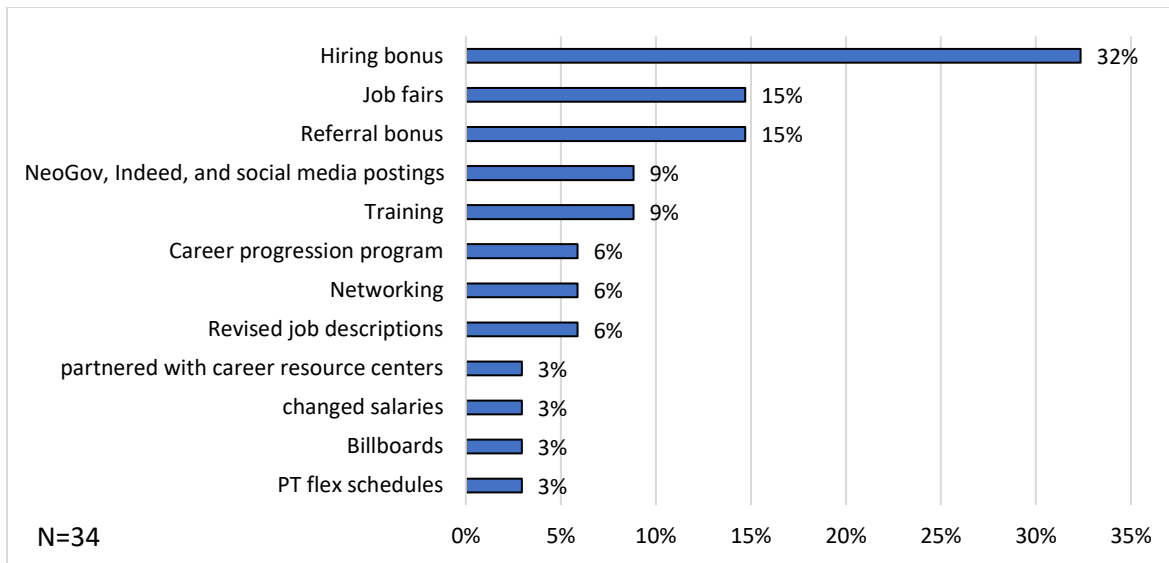


Figure 22. Type of recruitment practices implemented

Employment Benefits

When asked what types of benefits employees receive, dental insurance, health insurance, and sick leave are the most common benefits offered, followed closely by annual leave and vision insurance as shown in Figure 23. Additionally, agencies were asked about the evaluation of their benefits package, and more than half, 51 percent, indicated that their benefits package has been evaluated, as shown in Figure 24. The most noted benefit evaluation frequency was annually, and the most common element of the benefits package to be reviewed is the salary.

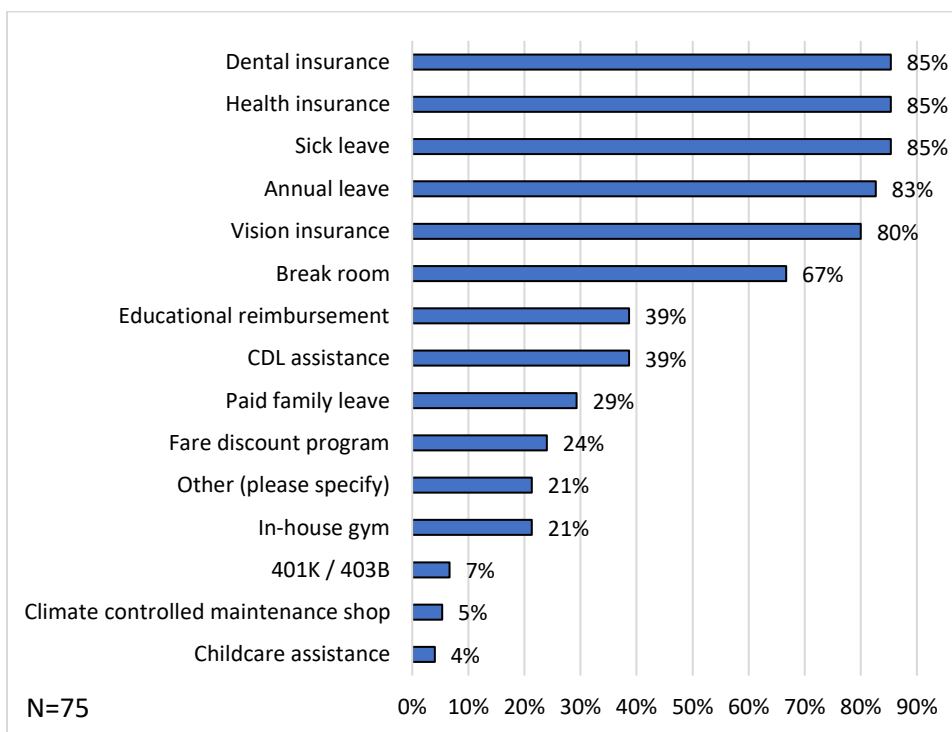


Figure 23. Benefits offered

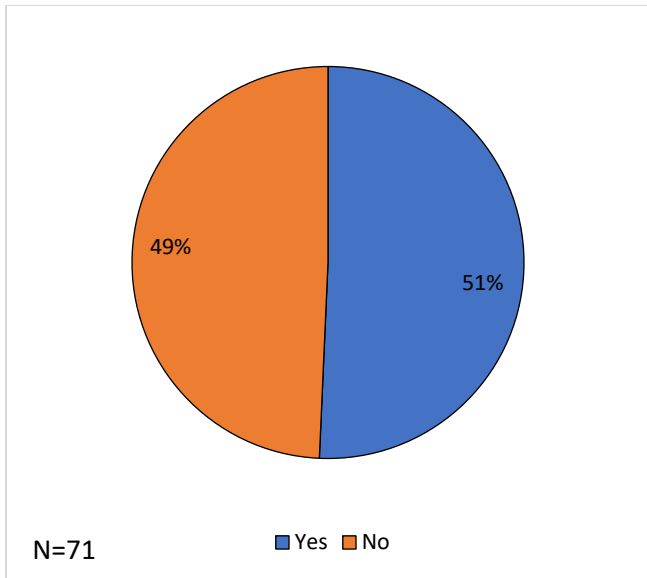


Figure 24. Evaluations of benefit packages

Referral Bonuses

Beyond asking about general benefits, respondents were asked if current employees are eligible for referral bonuses, of which 36 percent of respondents do offer referral bonuses. Figure 25 shows the breakdown of those that offer referral bonuses, and the value of that bonus if it was provided. The most common referral bonus amount was \$500. Figure 26 shows the probationary period that must pass before the referral bonus is received, with 90 days as the most common length.

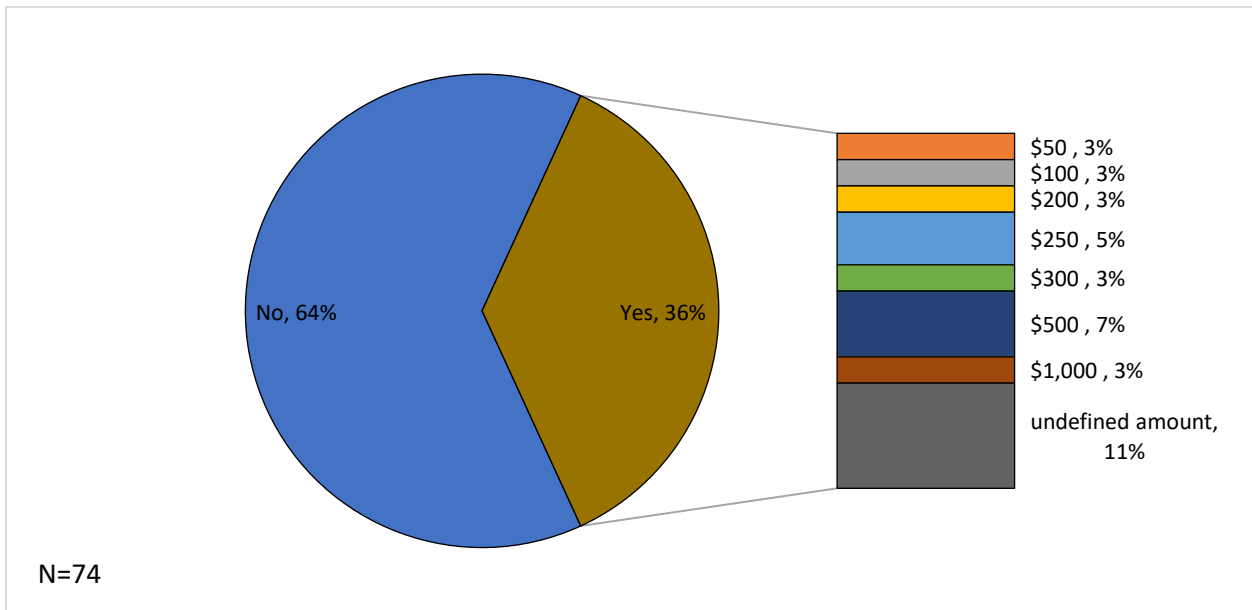


Figure 25. Referral bonuses

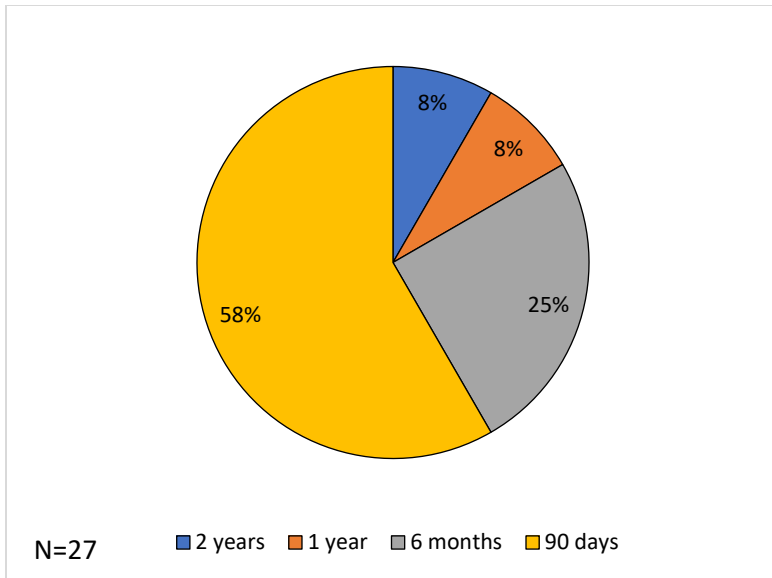


Figure 26. Probationary period for referral bonus

Strategies to Assist with Retention

Agencies were asked if they have implemented any policy or process change in an attempt to attract and retain talent, of which 48 percent have implemented some policy or process change as shown in Figure 27. Figure 28 displays the various policies in place with increased wages ranking as the most common policy implemented to attract and retain talent, followed by sign-on bonuses and flexible schedules.

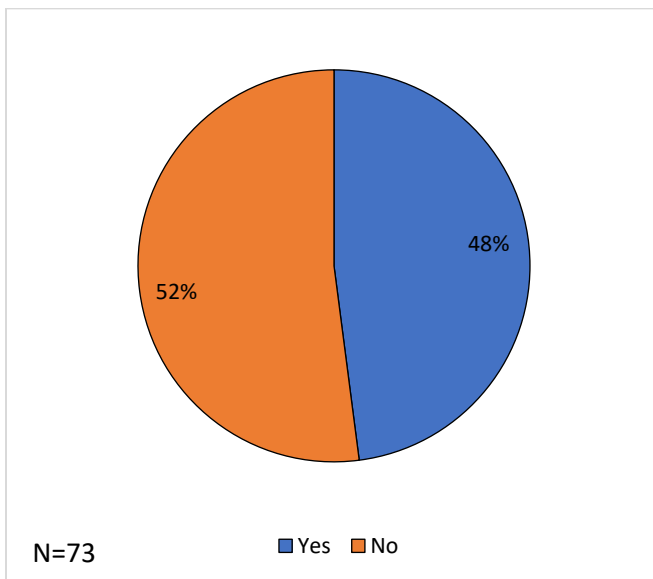


Figure 27. Policy or process change implemented to attract and retain talent

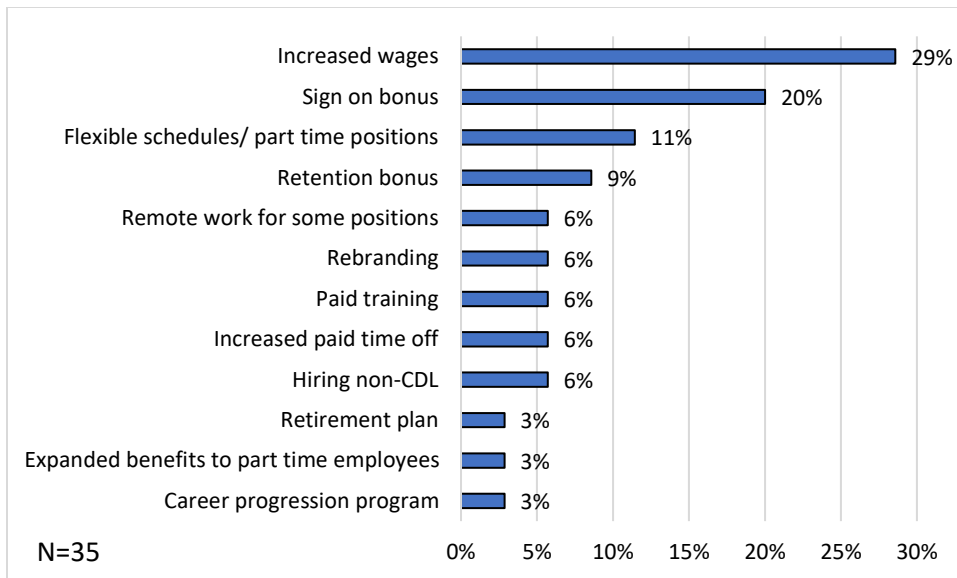


Figure 28. Policies in place to attract and retain talent

Respondents were also asked if there have been any service delivery changes implemented to attract and retain talent, and while only 15 percent of respondents indicated such a change, the specific delivery changes are shown in Figure 29, with flexible scheduling as the most common delivery service change.

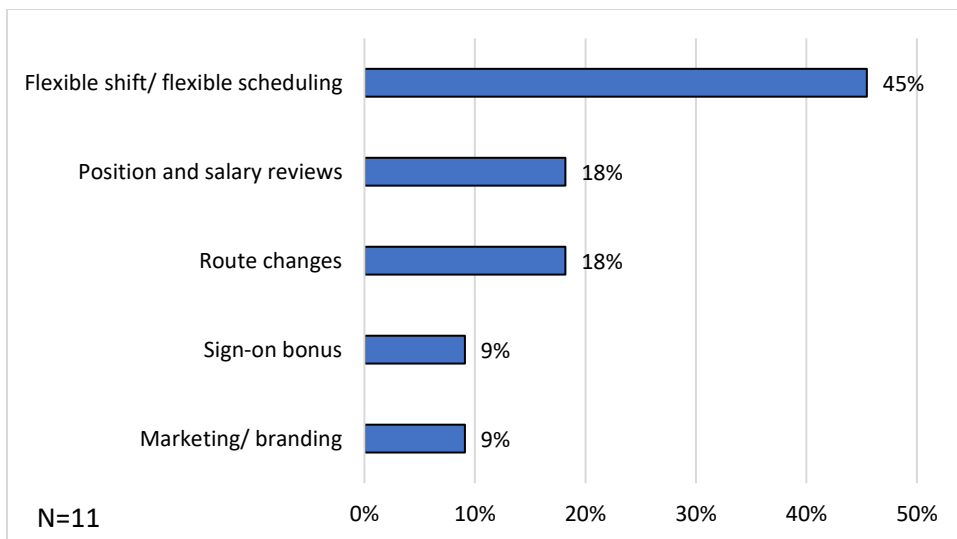


Figure 29. Service delivery changes implemented to attract and retain talent

Finally, respondents were asked about their retention strategies. Figure 30 shows that employee recognition programs are in place at three out of every four agencies in the state, and employee performance reviews are also very common. Meanwhile, 40 percent of respondents indicated that they use social media posts, such as those on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. The least common retention strategy listed is partnerships with high schools, universities, and technical schools.

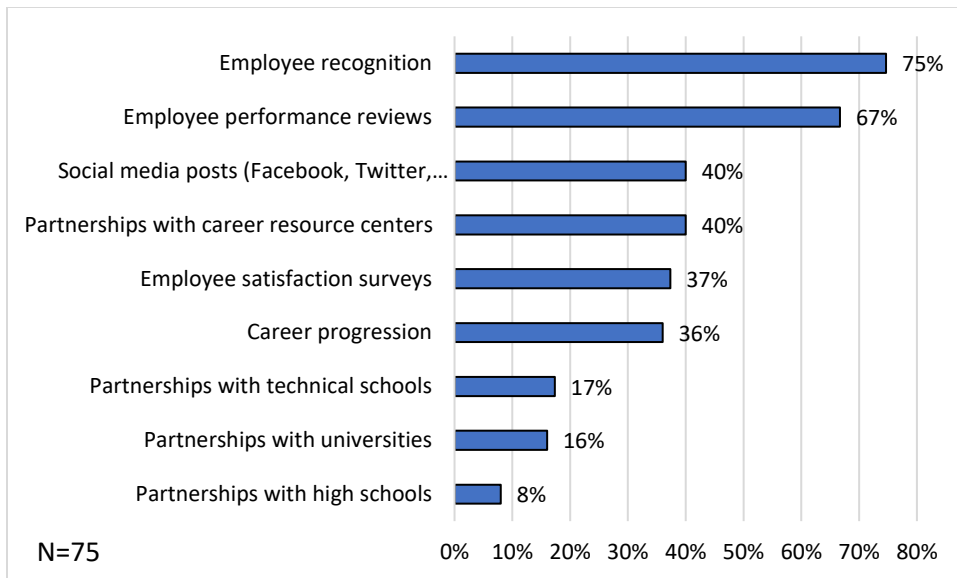


Figure 30. Retention strategies

It is clear from the agency responses that many agencies are facing similar and significant challenges with attracting and retaining employees. While the type of vacant positions varies by the type of services each agency provides and by the funding source each agency receives, it is obvious that changes must occur if we, as an industry, are going to continue to serve our communities. This survey and the subsequent analysis should serve as an opportunity to compare with peers in the state, and to identify strategies that may not have previously been considered, in an attempt to attract and retain more talent in the transit industry.

Case Study Examinations

One of the final questions of the survey asked if the respondent was willing to serve as a case study agency and respond to additional follow-up questions. From those agencies that were willing to participate as case studies, six Florida case study agencies were selected due to a variety of characteristics, including their cumulative representativeness of vacancies in every department. Additionally, the case study agencies were selected due to the various partnerships and implemented service changes that they mentioned in their survey responses. One additional non-Florida transit agency, Norwalk Transit District, was interviewed as a case study due to their defined success in the use of online job advertisements to attract new applicants.

Table 2. Case Study Locations

Case Study Agencies	City	Service Type
Brevard Achievement Center, Inc.	Rockledge, FL	Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities
Big Bend Transit	Tallahassee, FL	Rural Area
Citrus Connection	Lakeland, FL	Urbanized Area
City of Key West/Key West Transit	Key West, FL	Rural Area
StarMetro	Tallahassee, FL	Urbanized Area
Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority	Clearwater, FL	Urbanized Area
Norwalk Transit District	Norwalk, CT	Urbanized Area

Brevard Achievement Center Inc.

Brevard Achievement Center Inc. (BAC) was selected as a case study agency due to their reported revised job descriptions and partnerships with universities, high schools, and career resource centers. BAC is a 5310 funded agency with a total of 30 operators and 29 vehicles. BAC began its partnership with Brevard County Schools over 21 years ago. They were initially connected through an Interagency Council that Brevard Schools ran. BAC was awarded a grant through the Able Trust and started a program called World of Work. This was geared toward students that had IEPs to provide them with learning opportunities about work and what it meant to have a job. They were offered in-class presentations, speakers from local businesses as well as tours of local businesses. BAC provided those services with the help of Able Trust. While BAC is not sure how long the grant lasted, eventually, the services were provided through a contract with the School Board. BAC also began to provide services for High School Students through the PACE program – Practical Applications through Career Exploration. The World of Work program ended a few years ago, but the PACE Program² continues today- currently serving over 650 students. BAC is currently in the process of working with Eastern Florida State University to help provide a 6-month training program, LaunchIT Training, to individuals with varied abilities.

To foster partnerships with Brevard County Schools, BAC holds regular meetings with School Board staff and includes School Board staff in their annual mock interview process.

BAC revised their job descriptions to ensure that all the duties that are expected of an employee are defined in the job description, to reduce the surprise of expectations when the employee starts. In addition, BAC instituted a hiring bonus in 2021 on the positions that were hardest to fill. Currently, only the open custodian positions qualify for the hiring bonus. The first year has shown some success in attracting custodial staff. BAC also increased the pay scale recently, with any direct care professionals' employee that was paid under \$15 per hour increased to \$15 per hour.

BAC hired some on-call operators to try to overcome some of the challenges associated with the split-shift nature of the service provided, but ultimately found that the on-call operator position was not a good fit for the BAC operating model.

BAC representatives suggest some best practices to increase applicants which include:

- increasing your starting salary,

² <https://www.fscacademy.com/pace-iep>

- adjusting job descriptions annually and assessing those descriptions against fair wage using a third-party company to make the assessment,
- touting the benefits and incentive programs,
- touting the opportunities for employees to have an impact on their community, and
- posting opportunities on the agency website.

In terms of retention, BAC representatives recommend being mission-driven, and ensure that all employees know the mission, providing activities to bring employees together, and celebrating to build an atmosphere of comradery that employees look forward to coming to work. Finally, BAC recommends reviewing salaries annually, in conjunction with performance reviews.

Big Bend Transit

Big Bend Transit was included as a case study agency in an attempt to learn more about their partnerships with universities and technical schools, and to learn about the service changes that they implemented in an attempt to attract and retain more talent. Big Bend Transit began their relationship with their local university through a vanpooling contract with the university, and they currently capitalize on that relationship by advertising their part-time positions to students at the university. Big Bend Transit also established a relationship with their local technical school by providing deviated fixed route shuttles to the campus. They now work to recruit mechanics from that technical school, reaping some of the benefits of their established relationship.

Big Bend Transit representatives touted the success of providing more flexible opportunities and working around the applicant's availability when possible. Big Bend Transit realized that the typical motivators were not working to attract applicants since the pandemic and found the introduction of more part-time and flexible schedules to be a part of the solution to their challenges. For example, prior to the pandemic, about 13 percent of Big Bend Transit operators worked part-time. Currently, approximately 44 percent of Big Bend Transit operators are part-time operators that work around 18 hours per week or less.

Another way that Big Bend Transit has increased the number of successful applicants is by reducing the time of the hiring process. While the previous process waited until one step was completed before initiating the next step of the hiring process, now the motor vehicle records and other background checks are run simultaneously, decreasing the time to hire once a position has been offered.

Career Source career fairs have been the most successful new employee generator, and Big Bend Transit has successfully worked with Career Source for more than 12 years. Beyond Career Source, the referral bonus in place has been the second most successful new employee generator, with one employee responsible for the recruitment of 6 current operators, earning her a total of \$1,200. Big Bend Transit has realized that their own employees are their biggest champions and providing a referral bonus is a mutually beneficial effort that has increased not just applicants, but long-term employees. The referral bonus is paid after the new employee has worked at the agency for 90 days.

In terms of retention strategies, Big Bend Transit suggests that peer agencies ensure that their current workforce is not getting burnt out, emphasizing that employees are the most powerful force in our agencies. Focusing on flexibility and providing benefits like childcare assistance are two ways to prove investments in the current workforce.

Citrus Connection

Citrus Connection was included as a case study agency in an attempt to learn more about their partnerships with universities and technical schools, and to learn about the service changes that they implemented in an attempt to attract and retain more talent. Citrus Connection has fostered an internship program with Polk State and Southeastern Colleges over the past five to six years and credits the success of the internship program to dedicated employees and structured learning environments as opposed to informal or vague assignments. Citrus Connection representatives mentioned that interns thrive in an environment where they are in small groups, under constant supervision, working on project-focused work with a shadow approach. Additionally, it is important to ask, understand, and communicate the interests and needs of both the intern and the intern's supervisor, to ensure that expectations are understood, and the outcomes of the efforts are mutually beneficial. This structured internship program has consistently led to the annual hiring of one to two interns.

Citrus Connection also partners with CareerSource to provide 20-week paid internships to high school students, which is paid through CareerSource. This is a great opportunity to introduce the idea of transit as a deliberate career choice for the newest generation of employees. CareerSource Florida³ is a statewide policy and investment board that connects businesses with the talented workforce and training needed to succeed and grow through the use of local teams throughout the state.

Another way that Citrus Connection has successfully decreased the number of vacant positions is by investing in a full-time recruiter, that specializes in recruiting and retaining a workforce. In addition to hiring a recruiter, Citrus Connection increased their base starting pay, which gives the recruiter a great incentive to highlight in recruitment efforts.

Citrus Connection was able to reduce the effects of their driver shortage challenges was through route analyses and improved efficiencies, which ultimately led to reduced routes, and thus a reduced number of needed operators. Other agencies may benefit from analyses that may identify potential efficiencies, leading to an opportunity to reduce the number of operators required to provide service.

Beyond attracting new applicants, there is also a need for improved retention throughout the entire transit industry. Citrus Connection works to improve retention by one of the most difficult performance metrics to measure, culture, and environment. One example of a morale building incentive is the gym membership that Citrus Connection offers to their operators. Another characteristic of a desirable culture and environment includes being available when needed, which is evident by human resource availability to front-line employees from 5 am to 5 pm at Citrus Connection. Investing in cross-training employees is mutually beneficial, as employees feel like the agency is investing in them, while the agency is able to utilize their workforce more nimbly. A resounding response indicated the importance of providing a pleasant working environment, a culture of appreciation and understanding, and an environment for both learning and fun, which provides the best return on investment in terms of employee retention.

Following the initial interview, Citrus Connection Recruiter initiated new interviewing techniques that caused the agency to staff over 103 percent in operators.

³ <https://careersourceflorida.com/business-services/>

Citrus Connection's recruiter started doing group interviews last Fall to increase applicants. The recruiter is the one who organized the initiative. Group interviews include usually 6-10 driver candidates who are each advised the interview will be 4 hours long prior to coming on property. Citrus Connection usually brings 2 Hiring Supervisors and 2 Human Resource representatives to the entire group interview process. Group interviews are time efficient and appropriate when there are many driver positions to fill. Some key points from the group interviews:

- The interview begins immediately upon arrival – assessing appropriate dress, etc. A driver candidate inappropriately dress is separated out.
- Candidates meet together and complete an employment application and the recruiter tells them about the position, salary, and benefits.
- Candidates then go on a 1 hour bus ride as a “realistic job preview”. While candidates are on the bus ride, Human Resources representatives review applications and assess candidates using open source information. Paratransit driver candidates tour a paratransit bus.
- Candidates return after the job preview and are group interviewed for another 45 minutes with feedback about the bus ride or paratransit bus operation preview. This helps to identify what the applicants learned as part of the interview.
- Candidates are then ranked by Supervisors and Human Resources representatives. Typically the top candidates are selected for immediate 30 minute interviews with a very high likelihood of an employment offer.
- Candidates not selected for interviews are separated and informed they were not selected.

City of Key West

The City of Key West was included as a case study agency in an effort to learn more about the service changes that were implemented in an attempt to attract and retain more talent. With a uniquely limited-service area, the City of Key West has come up with some innovative solutions to combat some of the challenges that are related to workforce shortages. Similar to the challenges that many transit agencies face, their front-line employees are often priced out of housing options close to the transit agency, resulting in lengthy commutes. In an effort to offset some of those affordability challenges, the City of Key West has increased CDL operator pay from \$19.96 per hour to \$26.55 per hour. Additionally, the City of Key West hired their first non-CDL operator in October 2020 and in November 2022 implemented an on-demand service to replace local fixed route service to additionally reduce the number of operators needed to provide service. The idea of on-demand service was realized when the route tenability was questioned, and ideas were received from various conference conversations which led to the focus on providing mobility. The on-demand service provides an opportunity for the City of Key West to serve many areas that were not previously served by current fixed route service, and that additional service is provided with fewer operators needed, compared to the fixed route service values.

One trend that was realized through data analysis revealed that operators that work four 10-hour shifts tend to have less turnover than operators that work five 8-hour shifts. The agency also noted that predictability and flexibility are helpful for retention

Exit interviews were recognized as a valuable opportunity to reveal the challenges that front-line employees are facing. Exit interviews revealed that the cost of living and housing challenges are insurmountable for many, with challenges associated with regentrification, that exacerbate the retention challenges the agency faces. The City of Key West representatives mentioned the importance

of looking at hiring and retention from a different perspective, approaching recruiting front-line employees like one would recruit a college athlete, touting the improved and comfortable uniforms, the break room, and driver room facilities and other amenities that make working for the agency enjoyable and focus on the beneficial traits that make the agency a desirable place to work.

StarMetro

StarMetro was selected as one of the case study agencies in an attempt to learn more about their bus operator career progression program, along with StarMetro's partnerships with high schools, technical schools, and universities. Finally, StarMetro also participates in virtual and in-person job fairs, which was noted as a method to increase applicants.

StarMetro introduced their operator career progression program in 2021, and it has led to increased attraction and retention of operators to help stop the bleed associated with the lack of operators. It is worth noting that StarMetro does not have a labor union in place, and thus the implementation of an operator career progression program was less complicated than the process would be with an agency that has a labor union established. The career progression program has enticed some previous operators, who left StarMetro for other driving opportunities for more money, to return to StarMetro due to the opportunity for advancement. While the program is not quite mature enough to cite any specific safety improvements, there is anecdotal evidence that it is improving the retention efforts of the agency by proving to operators that they are invested. StarMetro representatives did suggest that any agency that might be considering a similar program also invests in technology to help track the progress and all the other information that will be collected as part of this type of program. It is important to measure the metrics to manage the success of the program.

One of the beneficial parts of being in a college town is the access to opportunities for partnership development with local schools. StarMetro has worked to sustain longstanding relationships with schools in their area, partnering with Florida State University for more than four decades. They have also instituted partnerships with Florida A&M University, Lively Technical School, Tallahassee Community College, and local K-12 schools. These partnerships have led to annual hires from the School of Transportation and Urban Planning. StarMetro has also helped to sustain these relationships with ridership contracts as well. Another benefit of having so many schools in your community is the opportunity to target advertisements that are most visible to students to increase their awareness of the transit agency as a career option.

One other incredible way that StarMetro increases their number of applicants is by partnering with the County, City, and Chamber of Commerce to participate in various job fairs throughout the community. Participating in these events provides those friendly faces to associate the transit agency with, and an opportunity for agency representatives to brag about the organizational culture, which is hard to translate into advertising.

When asked about best practices to share with their peers, StarMetro representatives touted using their resources to their advantage by using their buses as rolling ads for hiring, along with the use of banners, billboards, and social media. It is best when agencies can target their advertisements toward the markets, they are most likely to attract to apply, and tout the benefits of flexible schedules and part-time opportunities, especially in college communities.

Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority

Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA) was selected as a case study agency due to their reported partnerships with technical schools and for their Leadership PSTA Program.

Partnerships with Technical Schools

PSTA began partnering with their local Pinellas technical school, Pinellas Technical College (PTC), more than 10 years ago by volunteering to participate on the Business Advisory Boards of several of the college's programs (Diesel Systems Technician, Accounting Operations, and Medical Administrative Specialist). PSTA representatives touted the importance of making the partnership a mutually beneficial relationship, based on recurring communication and support. Agencies can do this in many ways including volunteering to serve on advisory boards, donating end-of-life equipment, participating in internship and mentoring programs with the school, and investing time and energy into fostering relationships with the advisors and directors to find out how the agency can help the school. Other activities that lead to more involvement with local schools include participating in mock interviews and organizing a clothing drive for gently used professional wear.

PTC's Diesel Systems Technician program offers an internship, and several students have been placed at PSTA to receive hands-on experience in a guided curriculum setting that is intimate enough to allow for sufficient question and answer opportunities for interns to learn and engage. This hands-on experience gained in the internship provides the interns with an experience advantage over their peers while also providing connections within the agency. This helps to substantiate the transit agency as a career option as students are graduating. PSTA has hired several previous interns, and even touts that the 2022 Florida Technician of the Year, hired at PSTA in 2015, was a graduate of that internship program.

Beyond focusing on the immediate pipeline from technical schools, PSTA is also involved in recruiting younger students through events like the Great American Teach-In, and a summer internship program open to high school students interested in information technologies, operations, human resources, marketing, planning, or any other position at the agency. PSTA paused the high school summer internship opportunities throughout the pandemic, but the agency is eager to reengage with the students in the future.

Day in the Life

Another successful way that PSTA has increased their applicant pool is through a recently created a hiring advertisement that shows "a day in the life" of a Bus Operator and is streamed to targeted audiences. First, PSTA invested in a videographer that shadowed operators and used that footage to develop a marketing advertisement that sold PSTA as a great place to work. That hiring advertisement was then disseminated through purchased ads on YouTube, Hulu, Paramount+, and other streaming services. The goal was to advertise where the job seekers are, focusing on targeted audiences that are most likely to apply, based on geographic location and household income. It is also important to keep the marketing materials aesthetically pleasing, so that emails, bus shelter ads, bench ads, and more draw attention. Any way that an agency can appeal to the media, provides potential benefits. For example, PSTA invited local news stations to send journalists to experience driving their buses around a closed parking lot. The journalists had a blast taping those segments, and every news channel played a story on the need for operators at PSTA. While this is not necessarily a tactic that would work multiple times, sometimes it is beneficial to think outside of the box in terms of ways to promote the fun parts of working at a transit agency.

When asked about best practices for attracting new employees to apply, PSTA representatives touted the importance of creating a hiring marketing strategy in the same way that the agency executes a marketing strategy to promote your services. This involved working closely with the marketing team to “sell” the positions you are looking to fill. Communicate the most appealing aspects of the position and promote those aspects using social media, and other avenues. Buy ads and invest in recruiting to market your agency as a desirable opportunity for advancement.

Organizational Development

Similar to the other transit agency case study agencies, PSTA touted the importance that organizational culture plays in employee retention. One way PSTA supports a positive organizational culture is to invest in the development of their employees. PSTA has a leadership development program called Leadership PSTA, which is a year-long program that trains high-potential employees leadership skills. This defined criteria, focused on individual projects and monthly course curriculum, provides great opportunities to employees and supports a sustainable succession planning strategy. PSTA offers many other development opportunities at all levels of the organization, including AWESOME Bosses Bootcamp for all managers, a Learning Management System (LMS) with on-demand webinars on a huge variety of topics, tuition assistance programs, and internal internship opportunities.

Another way that PSTA invests in the organizational culture is through their Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). PSTA currently has 5 active ERGs which include a veteran, multicultural magic, working parents, pride, and disability/accessibility groups. Lunch and learn sessions are conducted by the ERGs along with other social activities that allow employees to build friendships with their fellow employees.

When asked about best practices for retaining talent, PSTA representatives touted the importance of fair pay, growth opportunities, and sustaining a culture where people feel like they belong. Investments in ERGs and employee development, commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and a focus on the culture, show that the agency brings all voices into the conversations and treats employees like valuable stakeholders through empowerment and investment.

Norwalk Transit District

Norwalk Transit District was the only non-Florida transit agency selected as a case study agency. Norwalk Transit District was selected as a case study agency due to their reported success with online job advertisements posted on Indeed. They have allocated a small portion of their recruitment budget to the sponsored job on Indeed. They did note they have also attempted to use Facebook Jobs with boosting advertisements, but did not have any success.

When Norwalk Transit District first used an online job advertisement, they were grossly unsuccessful using a long, detailed title that described both full and part-time positions licensure requirements, and more. Norwalk Transit District then decided to take a different approach, posting a much shorter job posting that simply mentioned “drivers wanted” with the pay and bonus amounts. This abbreviated job posting attracted many more applicants. Additionally, the online job postings allow for screener questions for interested applicants, which Norwalk Transit District recommends limiting to between 5 and 8 questions. While this will allow some unqualified applicants to get through the screening process, it limits the number of qualified applicants that are turned away.