

MOBILITY FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS: MEETING NOTES

Tuesday, March 9th, 2021

Zoom Remote Meeting

Attendees: Adrian Down (Port of Seattle), Aidan Johan (Boulder County Mobility for All), Alison Turner (City of Tukwila), Betsy Maxwell (City of Kirkland), Bree Boyce (Hopelink), Brock Howell (SNOTRAC), Carol Ladwig, Chris Andree (City of Tukwila), Dani Hurula (King County Metro), Dean Sydnor (RARET), Kirk Hovenkotter (Greater Redmond Transportation Management Association), Kristina Sawyckj (Sound Transit Advisory Board), Liz Tilton (Puget Sound Educational Service District), Mahala Willard (University of Washington), Preston Rodriguez (Seattle Southside Chamber of Commerce), Salwa Raphael (SVMC), Sara Sisco (Hopelink), Sarah Boden (Beeline Mobility), Sol Dressa (Greater Redmond Transportation Management Association), Staci Sahoo (Hopelink), Victor Londono-Quintero (Community Van), Victoria Tobin (King County Metro), and Wren Barulich (Commute Seattle).

Presenters: Aelia (Casa Latina), Caryn Walline (University of Washington), Elvia Cortes (Casa Latina), Laura Lee Sturm (Seattle Department of Transportation), and Maria Luisa (Casa Latina).

Staff Support: Cassidy Giampetro, Catalina Gomez, Bebhinn Gilbert, and Staci Sahoo

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

The meeting began at 1:05 PM.

Attendees were called on to introduce themselves. Cassidy reviewed the agenda and Zoom logistics with the group.

PRESENTATIONS: MOBILITY FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS

This meeting centered on discussing mobility for essential workers. It sought to do this by bringing in three distinct perspectives: that of a city agency confronting this subject, an employer, and of essential workers themselves. An article was shared during the meeting that expanded upon the need to put essential workers at the forefront of continuing conversations around mobility post-COVID.

City Perspective: Laura Lee Sturm of the Seattle Department of Transportation

Laura Lee Sturm of the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) began presentations by introducing the Seattle Transportation Benefit District (STBD)'s Essential Worker Pilot. The Seattle Transportation Benefit District was renewed in November 2020 with an amendment explicitly supporting funding for essential workers.

SDOT is now in the process of building out an Essential Worker Pilot program. Laura Lee took the group through SDOT's new efforts by addressing the following questions:

1. How is SDOT defining Essential Workers?

SDOT is defining essential workers through industry, as this method offers the simplest way to get at this group beyond a measure like income threshold, for which there are already reduced fare programs. A racial equity lens has also been incorporated as part of the definition of essential workers, with SDOT's essential workers group showing higher proportions of BIPOC communities than the general worker group.

2. Who needs the benefit?

The existing ORCA LIFT program already seeks to meet low-wage workers' needs; however, many low-wage workers still make too much to qualify for ORCA LIFT. SDOT looked at some priority routes that had the lowest ridership decline found that those using ORCA LIFT represented a higher proportion of continued ridership during COVID-19.

3. Who already has the benefit?

SDOT does not want this pilot to be duplicative of other options available for the defined essential workers group. For example, over 50% of essential workers in Seattle are healthcare staff who are often provided transportation support through their work. Other existing options include King County Metro's Business Choice and Passport accounts for employers to offer to employees, reduced fare passes to youth, low-income riders, seniors, and people with disabilities, and SDOT programs that subsidize communities through schools and housing. Therefore, SDOT is looking to provide support to individuals in the "grey area" of being low-income but making too much for programs like ORCA LIFT.

4. How would SDOT distribute the benefit?

SDOT is looking at Seattle's ReSET zones, which derive from a COVID-19 recovery plan that the City of Seattle created based on COVID-19 cases, racial and social equity index, and the displacement risk index. This pilot program will align with the analysis already done on those recovery areas to distribute the benefit. This amounts to distributing the benefit in central locations that are the focus of COVID-19 recovery efforts, being Pioneer Square, International District, Othello, and Rainier Valley.

5. How can SDOT afford this benefit?

A 3-year program is currently budgeted through the SBTD. This timeline was selected because there is still so much to be understood about serving this population and what kind of pilot works for them; so, the intention is to start small and adapt as information is gained. The proposal for the pilot is a 6-month fully subsidized pass, launching in May 2021. The pilot would serve around 1,500 – 2,000 workers. There will be robust data collection in first 6 months to inform 2022 program adjustments for a more sustainable program.

Next Steps:

Laura Lee affirmed that the pilot program still requires approval from the Mayor's Office and Council. Their input could shift the plan. There will also be opportunities for community engagement as the pilot gets built out.

Opportunities:

As the pilot launches, SDOT will look for distribution partners to get the benefit out to essential workers. They will also be collecting data throughout the pilot using a registration form. This data collection, which will occur after the first six months, is critical to understanding the essential worker group better and providing a foundation for more sustainable programs that genuinely meet their needs.

To learn more, contact Laura Lee Sturm at lauralee.sturm@seattle.gov.

Employer Perspective: Caryn Walline of the University of Washington

Caryn Walline of the University of Washington (UW) started by sharing how their transportation team is continuing its efforts to serve essential workers. There are still many essential workers traveling to campus. They include those working at medical centers, doing maintenance and building services, and students, staff, and visitors seeking in-person services or who may be performing research, labs, and the like.

Many essential workers are shift workers, so they are coming and leaving work when public transit may not work with their schedule, and they are also often low-income.

The University of Washington has been working on several efforts to understand their essential worker population's needs. They include:

- **Transportation Needs Assessment:** This assessment, planned before COVID-19 impacts but implemented during COVID, surveyed 1,210 students, staff, and faculty (149 essential workers). This assessment sought to better understand staff's motivation and barriers using sustainable transportation and provided insights into COVID-19 changes.
 - As a next step to this needs assessment, UW Transportation is working with PacTrans on an essential worker pilot to address needs through carpooling and vanpooling.
- **Departmental Outreach:** The UW Transportation team has been working with the building services, maintenance and construction, and medical centers Departments to understand the needs of their specific workforces.
- **Direct Feedback:** Through emails, calls, and other feedback loops, the Transportation team has been hearing directly about the unmet needs and successes of commuters.

The Transportation Needs Assessment revealed that about 70% of the people who were still coming to campus in fall 2020 were driving alone. Pre-COVID, only about 17% of staff were driving alone, with about 40% taking public transit; only 13% reported taking public transit in fall 2020. Caryn showed an even more detailed breakdown on the types of UW staff driving alone, which showed that classified staff, who are often earning less than faculty, were driving alone less.

The assessment showed many reasons why people's commute patterns changed. Caryn broke the barriers down by mode:

- People felt less comfortable on public transit due to potential exposure to COVID-19 and increased travel times due to COVID-19 service reductions.
- People were less likely to take vanpool and carpool because of fears associated with exposure to COVID-19 and, with the onset of teleworking, less reliable work schedules.
- In general, people relayed a preference for driving alone. Less traffic makes SOV use the fastest and easiest, limits exposure to COVID-19, and is quickest specifically due to reduced bus schedules.

One of the adjustments that the University of Washington made to address essential workers' needs is to adapt their U-PASS Vanpool program. The program is now fully subsidized and will stay this way after COVID-19. Vanpool users receive complimentary parking and participation in a guaranteed ride home program. The UW also invested in new safety practices for the vanpool program to maintain safety during COVID-19. Before the pandemic, Vanpool users were required to have 5+ passengers per van; however, the program has adjusted to allow for social distancing and suggests vans to three or fewer passengers now. The vans receive daily attestation. Messaging and communications about safe rideshare practices are widely distributed.

Other efforts the UW has made around essential workers include:

- Promoting transit access
 - Unionized staff at UW receive fully subsidized U-PASS benefits. However, many of these unionized staff are shift-workers who cannot rely on public transportation when they go to work. Therefore, UW has been continued to advocate for expanded service to meet these needs with regional transit agencies, including in the service restoration process.
- Parking management
 - At the beginning of COVID-19, essential workers received complimentary parking around UW and departmental assistance to ensure they could use the transportation mode that made them feel safest.
- UW Shuttle
 - The UW Shuttle that runs between UW Seattle and medical centers continued to run on reduced service. The NightRide program provides rides at night to staff and faculty also continued operations.
- Partnered with JUMP to provide complimentary rides to UW Medical Center staff.

View the [meeting slides](#) and contact Caryn Walline with questions at carynw@uw.edu.

Essential Worker Perspective: Aelia, Elvia, and Maria Luisa of Casa Latina

Aelia, Elvia, and Maria Luisa joined the meeting to provide their perspectives of getting around during COVID-19 as people reliant on transit to get to work. Each shared a bit of how they used to get around before COVID-19, how their commute has changed, and what experiences they've had adapting to these changes.

Aelia began the conversation by discussing how her son used to drive her to work but, after COVID-19, she switched to public transit. She relayed a thankfulness for being connected to Casa Latina because the organization provided her information, education, and support about staying safe during COVID-19 – including on public transit. She was appreciative to transit agencies in their efforts to keep riders safe, by protecting both the riders and drivers. However, she still felt hesitant and unsure about other rides using public transit and not following safety guidelines. This makes her uncomfortable.

Elvia also uses public transit to get to Casa Latina and her work. During COVID-19, she became scared to use the bus. She started using Uber, but it was too expensive. Sometimes her daughter can transport her, but the bus is often her only option. Even though she was nervous about exposure to COVID-19, she uses the bus. She shared that the drivers are kind, the safety measures provided are very helpful, and that she always wears gloves and a mask; however, like Aelia, she feels that other riders on the bus do not respect the rules or safety guidelines. This can make riding the bus stressful to her. She was thankful to Casa Latina for hosting a workshop that reviewed how to follow COVID-19 safety recommendations to stay safe.

Maria Luisa reflected the same sentiment as Aelia and Elvia, as she used to feel very safe using public transit but has now become weary during COVID-19. She cannot drive so the bus is her only option; she uses the bus sometimes six times a day. She feels a lot of anxiety about other riders who do not use their masks or follow protocol. She makes a large effort to stay safe, including cleaning the bus seats before she sits. Maria Luisa affirmed how vital safety is for her, for herself and because she is fearful of bringing COVID-19 to her family.

Each woman also affirmed their gratefulness for public transit agencies' measures to ensure safety – like providing masks and establishing dividers for drivers. During the Q&A portion, Aelia, Elvia, and Maria Luisa shared more about their experiences.

DISCUSSION: MOBILITY FOR ESSENTIAL WORKERS (Q+A)

Question to Aelia, Elvia, and Maria Luisa: What would make you feel more comfortable using public transit during COVID-19?

- All three shared that vaccine efforts will make them feel safe again on public transit.
- Elvia shared that she tries to get on less crowded buses, and this makes her feel more comfortable.
- Maria Luisa shared that she would feel more comfortable if buses could enforce safety procedures more strictly so that people who do not adhere to guidelines are not allowed on the bus.

Question to Aelia, Elvia, and Maria Luisa: Have you considered any other kinds of mobility programs to get around besides public transit?

- Aelia responded that she only considers public transportation because this is her only option.

- Elvia replied that she is pleased with public transportation and has never considered buying a car.

Question to Aelia, Elvia, and Maria Luisa: Did you feel like you received good messaging and information around how public transportation was staying safe during COVID-19? Where did you hear this information?

- They all shared that they got their information from a combination of sources – TV, the internet, and on the bus itself. They shared that they got information from Facebook. They also felt like public transportation agencies have done a good job at distributing these messages.

Question to Aelia, Elvia, and Maria Luisa: Do you ever have challenges getting to the bus? For example, issues with sidewalks, bus stops, or reaching transit in general?

- Elvia and Maria Luisa shared that they can feel uncomfortable at bus stops when there are people under the influence, smoking, or otherwise using the bus stop for reasons other than waiting for the bus. They stated that bus stops can often be dirty, meaning they do not have a clean place to wait for the bus themselves.
- Aelia shared that she has adapted her bus route to avoid more crowded stops. For example, she arranged for her route and transfers to evade downtown areas where many people are at bus stops and getting on and off the bus.

Question to Laura Lee and Caryn: Is first mile/last mile part of the UW or SDOT strategy?

- Laura Lee said that SDOT is not looking into first mile/last mile options for their pilot.
- Caryn affirmed that the UW actively explores first mile/last mile solutions and is thinking through these options as they work towards future solutions. Questions about first-mile/last-mile options were a part of their survey.

Question to Laura Lee: For the ORCA LIFT program, many full-time minimum wage workers make too much to qualify for this benefit. Is there a case to be made about restructuring fares, considering there seems to be many new programs coming out that can confuse riders in understand which fares are right for them?

- Laura Lee agreed with this sentiment. She shared how the Federal Poverty Guidelines, which have not been updated for decades, make income thresholds and guidelines outdated. She shared that any fare reconceptualization or income threshold changes would need to be instigated by King County Metro. She thinks there may be new potential for King County Metro to be considering this.
- Laura Lee also shared about resources King County Metro has created to simplify and inform about their various fare programs, like the [updated visuals](#) on their website. Still, she encouraged attendees to connect with her privately if they are interested in more ideas around fare restructuring.

ROUNDTABLE SHARING

After the Q+A portion of the meeting, attendees shared the following announcements and updates:

- The King County Mobility Coalition published its [Community Transportation Needs Assessment](#), which has identified several unmet needs related to education, employment, and mobility for transportation-disadvantaged populations.
- Hopelink Mobility Management has been organizing the King County COVID-19 Vaccine Mobility Task Force. With the next phase of vaccine eligibility opening soon and including essential workers, the Task Force is invested in understanding the transportation needs of this community and ensuring transportation is not a barrier to vaccine access. If others hear of any needs or gaps related to this topic, please contact Staci Sahoo at SSahoo@hopelink.org to share.
- The City of Tukwila is continuing their [SKC Trips program](#) to incentivize those living, working, and traveling through South King County to use sustainable transportation options through a rewards model. Individuals can sign up for SKC Trips and receive rewards based on their sustainable commuting choices like ORCA subsidies and Amazon gift cards.
- The Regional Alliance for Resilient and Equitable Transportation (RARET) has worked to publish the [COVID-19 Transportation Resources](#) page on [FindARide.org](#). This webpage offers extensive information on how to find transportation to vaccine and COVID-19 testing appointments in Snohomish, King, and Pierce counties. RARET also hosts monthly meetings for partners in these three counties to discuss transportation issues related to COVID-19; reach out to Dean Sydnor at DSydnor@hopelink.org to get involved.
- The Washington State Rideshare Organization is actively [recruiting presentations for their Transportation in Technicolor](#) event related to marketing and communications, commuting during COVID-19, the future of vanpool, and ways to coordinate transportation with essential staff. This event will happen tentatively in-person in September 2021; if you are interested in presenting, contact Mahala Willard at mahalaw@uw.edu.
- King County Metro is partnering with Youth for Equitable Streets to conduct interviews and learn more about how youth connect to transit in South King County. Outcomes of these efforts are anticipated to be shared this spring, likely April.

ACTION ITEMS

- Attendees to take [feedback survey](#) to help inform the next Access to Work and School Roundtable meeting!

NEXT MEETING

June 8th, 2021 from 1pm – 3pm, through Zoom

ACCESS TO WORK AND SCHOOL CONTACT

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