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How Are Transit Agencies in California Addressing the Travel Needs of People Experiencing Homelessness?

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Issue

Increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness in California cities have prompted some transit agencies to address the needs of unhoused people and riders more comprehensively in their service plans. Some of these efforts respond to the presence of transit riders who are visibly homeless and seek shelter on transit vehicles, at transit stops, and on other agency property. Many people experiencing homelessness, however, are also active users of public transit, relying on buses and trains to access services, get to work, visit family, and more. Public transit is especially critical for those working to exit homelessness who do not have access to a personal vehicle.

To better understand how transit agencies are (or are not) addressing the travel needs of homeless populations, we reviewed policies and programs from twelve transit agencies in California, and interviewed transit representatives from four agencies, including two of the state's largest (i.e., Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro)). We focused on four major issues: (1) the cost of transit fares for unhoused persons; (2) transit riders' concerns related to safety and comfort due to the presence of visibly homeless persons on transit; (3) the needs of unhoused individuals as active transit users; and (4) outreach efforts to unhoused persons.

Key Research Findings

Very few transit agencies address the travel needs of unhoused individuals. Most agencies acknowledged the problem of unhoused people in their official documents; however, just seven specifically addressed their transit needs, and only three did so through a dedicated program.

Affordability is the greatest barrier to transit ridership for those experiencing homelessness. At least eight of California's transit agencies recognize this and have developed, or are developing, programs to defray costs for people experiencing homelessness. Other agencies without explicit programs do provide reduced fares for seniors, people with disabilities, and extremely low-income individuals — categories of riders with significant numbers of people experiencing homelessness. Expanding these programs to reduce, or eliminate, the price of transit could support service accessibility. Diversion and violation forgiveness programs for people with unpaid transit tickets or outstanding fines and fees for other violations, or who have been banned from riding transit, could also support the goals of accessibility. Programs such as Homeless Court in San Diego County and the San Francisco Metropolitan Transit Association's Access program, provide discounted transit passes and other resources to help people working to resolve their homelessness and to reestablish their ridership eligibility.

Safety concerns are a high priority for transit agencies.

Some transit users, especially in the Los Angeles and San Francisco regions, have voiced concerns about growing numbers of people who appear to be homeless in and around public transit. The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro) and the Bay Area Rapid Transit have responded to these concerns by increasing security measures and deploying visibly identifiable outreach workers who specialize in serving people experiencing homelessness. Two other transit agencies, San Diego Metropolitan Transit System and Antelope Valley Transit Authority, have focused exclusively on altering security protocols. While this may allay some riders' concerns, homeless advocates maintain that criminalizing homelessness in transit environments only pushes people into other public spaces, does not address the causes of homelessness, and may even make it more difficult for people to exit homelessness because they cannot access services via transit.

Improvements to transit service will help unhoused riders as well. Research suggests that most people experiencing homelessness rely on public transit for the same variety of reasons that all riders do. Like other riders, those experiencing homelessness find it difficult to reach necessary appointments, places of employment, and social engagements due to prohibitive costs and transit schedules that do not meet their needs. They also access social services more than housed individuals and this can be difficult to do using public transit. Transit agencies can play a role in facilitating service access by recognizing the diversity within the unhoused population and identifying barriers to access that may make transit reliability a challenge. Proximity of transit stops to homeless shelters and service providers can address a critical element of accessibility by reducing time

and travel distance for people staying in shelters. In San Diego County, for example, most shelters are within a quarter mile of a transit stop.

Public outreach can help those experiencing homelessness and reassure the public. Outreach efforts can connect homeless individuals with services but require building trusting relationships over time. For instance, LA Metro staff have worked on an informal, ad hoc basis to educate law enforcement, transit staff, and the public about myths versus realities around homelessness, such as the fact that people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be victims of crimes than perpetrators. Outreach is slow work and can only partially address commuter concerns in the near term, but combined with security presence, transit agencies can reassure all riders that transit remains accessible and safe. In addition, many people experiencing homelessness may not be visibly identifiable as unhoused and may not be staying on transit property.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the report “How Transit Agencies Can Serve the Mobility Needs of People Experiencing Homelessness” prepared by Jennifer Nations, Yao Fu, and Mirle Rabinowitz-Bussell with the University of California, San Diego. The report can be found at www.ucits.org/research-project/2022-52. For more information about the findings presented in this brief, please contact Jennifer Nations at jnations@ucsd.edu.

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