

County of Milwaukee

Interoffice Communication

DATE: 8/20/2021
TO: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
FROM: Donna Brown-Martin, Director, Department of Transportation
SUBJECT: Informational Report on MCTS Bus Operator Hiring and Retention

BACKGROUND

At the July 14, 2021, meeting of the Transportation, Public Works, and Transit Committee a report regarding Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) initiatives to increase hiring and retention of Bus Operators was requested.

DISCUSSION

As previously discussed at the July Committee meeting, MCTS is combatting a COVID-related slowdown of hiring, as well as employee attendance and retention issues. Member transit agencies at American Bus Benchmarking Group and American Public Transit Association are reporting similar hiring and retention issues, and the issue is affecting public and private sector employers in Wisconsin and the US.

MCTS is committed to solving its workforce issues and is bringing enterprise-wide resources to our efforts. In addition to hiring more than 160 Bus Operators from July 2020 through August 2021, the company has taken the following concrete steps:

- Offered a hardship bonus of \$200/week for employees from March 15, 2020 through June 26, 2020.
- Started offering back-to-back training classes in August 2020 to work through COVID-related class size restrictions.
- Held virtual Job Fairs in July 2020 (100+ attendees) and May 2021 (75 attendees).
- Conducted the first-ever employee engagement survey in November 2020.
- Increased training pay to \$15 per hour beginning January 2021 and \$18 per hour in August 2021.
- Tripled the recruitment advertising budget in February 2021 to reach more targeted job boards and increase proactive recruitment.
- Implemented a new hire signing bonus for Bus Operators of \$1,000 on May 25, 2021.
- Revised and clarified the attendance policy and other rules for Bus Operators in June 2021, with a focus on coaching rather than discipline.
- Authorized two additional Station Supervisor positions to increase capacity for 1x1 employee engagement in June 2021.
- Implemented a referral bonus for active employees for Bus Operator referrals of \$1,000 on July 1, 2021.
- Retained a contracted recruiter to expedite backgrounding and credentialing of Operator applicants.
- As part of MCTS Next, route schedules have been modified to provide more break time with better restroom access, and to increase the number of desirable 'straight runs' (as opposed to split shifts).
- Kicked off a recruitment campaign beginning in early August, 2021, featuring radio ads, on-bus ads, shelter ads, billboards, and enhanced social media activity.
- Authorized additional facility upgrades at various work sites to focus on better employee space, including updating breakrooms, restrooms, and water stations. Future upgrades include additional training space and enhancements to employee areas to provide a safe, comfortable and engaging environment for employees.

Most importantly, in April 2021, the Executive team at MCTS directed the creation of an Attendance-Retention workgroup, which is focused on comprehensively addressing these issues through data-driven analysis of attendance, recruitment and turnover factors. MCTS recognizes that ensuring high attendance and retention among bus operators is of the utmost importance to the organization's future, and that it requires sustained organizational attention and an ability to shift the culture and engage in new efforts. The Attendance-Retention Group is guiding MCTS on a systematic approach towards measuring the current and future state of attendance and retention, understanding the impact that ongoing and future efforts have on attendance and retention, and prioritizing employee engagement as a strategy for maintaining effective staffing levels and quality of service. Each department is taking a fresh look at practices and procedures to identify and overcome barriers to improving recruitment, attendance and retention.

Additionally, an Employee Engagement workgroup was established in April 2021 to follow through on the results from the 2020 employee engagement survey. That group is focused on finding avenues for better employee communication, better connection between administration and Bus Operators, and developing a better overall employee experience.

As of August 1, 2021, the number of Bus Operators was 713, with an additional 20-23 new Bus Operators scheduled to begin training by the end of August. In addition to the current hiring activity and as described above, MCTS will continue taking progressive steps toward increasing retention through stronger engagement, emphasizing coaching and training over discipline, and evaluating practices to generally improve the employee experience.

RECOMMENDATION

This report is presented for informational purposes only.

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