Hello, everyone. Welcome to TransitCenter. Thanks for joining us tonight. Can I have a show of hands of people here for the first time? Wow. Special thanks for coming. We hope to see you again in the future. Our program tonight I'm excited about. It is a little bit different than we usually do. For those of you not familiar with our work, we are a foundation that works in public transit. We work to improve public transit to create cities that are more sustainable, more equitable. We believe that frequent reliable public transit is the key to creating vibrant equitable cities.

I'm Chris Van Eyken, senior program associate. I'm the moderator tonight. We're going to learn about the experiences and bus operators. We strive to keep the focus here on TransitCenter and that's usually through supporting advocates as they work on the ground, in cities, providing best practice expertise, planners, people in headquarters or doing rider surveys to see what riders really want to get them back on the bus or train.

Today we're going to shift the focus to a different set of people that usually go ignored in the planning circles, the bus operators. Bus operators are critical to the success of a transit system. Without them the buses would never leave the depot. Co-workers and bus operators are the first people transit riders see every day. In addition to responsibilities bus operators function as the day to day -- the communities they serve give a unique perspective on transit service and how it is or isn't meeting the needs of riders. Operators can identify problems on the road that planners and managers don't see see firsthand. Tonight we're going to see what it's like to work that job. What we don't know about being an operator, what we can learn from experiences and how it is a national shortage to better award them and improve job quality.

Our four panelists tonight are Nathan Vass, a bus operator with King County Metro and the author of The Lines That Make Us.

J. P. Patafio, Vice President at Transit Workers Union Local 100. Keisha Farrell, Maryland Transit Administration Inreach Coordinator. She doesn't have experience behind the wheel but she plays a crucial role. Coordinates the communication between drivers and maintainers, in Baltimore and makes sure there's a positive back and forth between them.

Last but not least Dawn Distler, a former bus operator at Akron Metro and currently the Executive Director at Akron Metro. A great example of what we're trying to do here, get drivers in positions of leadership. Welcome.
Before we begin, I just want to let you know we'll have time at the end for audience questions. If you have one, there are index cards and little golf pencils around the room. Just write down your question and somebody from our staff will collect it.

NATHAN VASS: I'm testing out this mic to see if it works. Does it work? Great. Lovely.
I can't tell so I'm trusting you.

CHRIS VAN EYKEN: To start, why don't we go through the group and discuss why you became a bus operator in the first place. Keisha, this is different for you so you can describe to us how you came to your position.
NATHAN VASS: Very briefly, I'm a little younger than some of these folks on stage tonight. My story is a little bit different. I love buses --
(Laughter).
It's not like that. I'm calling myself too young. Trying to get to where you're at.
(Laughter).
I love buses as a child. Because when you're small you love things that are massive, like dinosaurs and monster trucks. As I become an adult the fascination remains but the reasons change. It's the opportunity to provide customer service, and interact with people in a very tactile and direct way. Gives me this really wonderful altruistic high, this energy I'm unable to find anywhere else. I write a blog about various things that happen on the bus. We all have a crazy bus story. The blog is primarily focused on unexpectedly positive things that transpire on the bus. I see buses as one of the last places in western advanced society where people cannot avoid each other. It's this wonderful egalitarian, democratic space where you just have to get along. The fact that more or less pretty often things do work out on buses, is a testament. Kind of a miracle which I love. I put out a book based on my blog called the lines that make us. I'm not going to plug it after this. That's where I'm coming from. I've been driving in Seattle for 12 years.

J.P. PATAFIO: I'm going to try to pick up on your blog. My father was a taxi driver. And I guess that's one of the ways I was introduced into this transportation business. As I was going to CUNY I got hooked up with some folks that decided to play in the same sand box as the Transit Workers Union. I got to know some of those Transit Workers Union folks who struggled. And one day one of them gave me an application and said this is a good union job. Local 100 is a very powerful union and could actually make changes that are good for not only people taking transportation but beyond. That's how I became a bus operator.
KEISHA FARRELL: I'm not a bus operator.
(Laughter).
Never was, never will be. But I do have bus operators in my family. And train operators, some of them actually work here in New York. I am a transplant from the Caribbean by way of New York to Maryland. So I come from a family of transit junkies. Literally.
(Laughter).
We're underground, here in New York, in Maryland. We like buses, trains, automobiles. Our spouses not so much.
(Laughter).
That's actually really true. And we do force them to ride everywhere we go. How did I come into this position? Like I said I did work in New York, in sales and publishing. I moved to Maryland shortly after I got married, still worked in publishing for a bit and started working on outreach projects for state highway administration. Came across some transit planners. They said you have a really good way with people. You're reasonably smart. Have you thought about planning? I was like sure. We redesigned the bus network in 2017 and it was a mini

disaster at first. Because the buses had never changed for over 60 years. A long time. So everyone had to relearn everything. And a big part of that was getting our bus operators on board because they are union. That's a lot of change in a really short space of time. So in order to kind of bring everyone along and make sure we were capturing everything we needed to capture, we were like we should ask the people who drive the buses because we're really going to change their lives and they're the ones we're going to expect to be the Ambassadors to the public who don't know where the bus is going. So the inreach program first comprised about 6 people that went to all the bus depots, asking questions of the bus drivers, what should we cut, what should we do with the bus stops? From there it went to how can we bring the staff into the planning process to make the schedules better, their lives better, impact the way the public rides, views, experiences our bus service. That's how I ended up where I am.
DAWN DISTLER: Well, my story is not near as exciting as any of those stories.
NATHAN VASS: I don't believe you.
DAWN DISTLER: I can't say just like you, I make my wife ride different modes of transportation everywhere we go. She just knows it's going to happen now. After 30 years, she just goes okay, whatever. I became a bus operator because I'd been laid off my job, actually calling people to see if salesmen could come into their homes and sell them things which was just so much fun.
(Laughter).
So there's nothing like rejection every day when someone hangs up the phone in your ear. But I'm out after a ball game, playing soft ball with friends, and like most great things that happen in your life, I'm sitting with a beer in my hand and somebody said you should drive a bus. Probably not right now.
(Laughter).
What I did was I said -- I can't drive a bus. They said sure you can. If I can, you can. They said go down, just fill out an application. This tells you how old I actually am.
(Laughter).
You didn't have to have a CDL license when I first became a bus operator. Chauffeur's license is all you had to have. I show up, the guy that hires people comes downstairs, he says let me see your license. I show him my license. He said that won't work. You don't have a chauffeur's license. Go get one and come back and maybe I'll talk to you. I left, went to the DMV, read the book in my car, took the test, came back within an hour. And said okay, I'd like to talk to Mr. West ton again. They called him, and he said I told her I'm not talking to her until she gets her chauffeur's license. They said you might want to come on down. He did. I handed him the chauffeur's license. He said I've never seen that. No way I can't hire you now. Rest is history.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: Dawn, how did you find your way from driving a bus to the head of the agency?
NATHAN VASS: That's what I want to know.
(Laughter).

DAWN DISTLER: So I can can -- you guys probably are going to like this back here. I can actually blame the union or thank the union for me being an Executive Director now. I was -- I

drove for ten years. And I was a union rep for six of those ten years. As a union rep, I totally believed in all of it. Still do. Still believe in unions.
J.P. PATAFIO: Just want to make sure.
(Laughter).

DAWN DISTLER: I personally don't have issues. I like strong unions because they not only stand up for their people. A strong union tells their people I'm going to stand up for you but they also tell their people when they're not doing something quite right. I like those. That's what we did as representatives. We negotiated a couple of great contracts that are still in place today. As a matter of fact, there are a couple of things we negotiated today that I'm going what the heck was I thinking? But I'm glad that we did. But one day we had one guy who just wouldn't do things right. We had taken his termination to arbitration three different times. Three different times we won which was awesome. That's a great thing, the way it's supposed to be. I looked at the union President and said we're spending an awful lot of money on somebody who doesn't represent us well. And he looked at me and says as long as he has a job you'll always have a job. I said no, I have a job because I do my job. It was kind of at that moment in my life I started thinking -- not that unions are bad. Not that at all. I still think unions are great. But the thing that's missing is we don't explain things to bus operators and I hate when somebody would tell me to do something, and I don't know why. I'm not a child. I'm an adult. Explain to me why I have to do it. I don't think it's busy work, or I don't think it's stupid or if I do think it's stupid still there's a reason for it. So even though I think it's a stupid reason I know what it is.
So I did. I went into management. I worked in Akron for a while in management and went to Nashville and worked my way up through Nashville. Then I went to Knoxville and ran that for a while and went full circle, came back to where I started and now I've been there for about 18 months as the Executive Director.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: Any of you want to jump in at any point please. I think many riders think of riding the bus and what the bus driver does as just getting people from point A to point B. In your time as a driver do you think there's anything you experienced that riders wouldn't expect about the job, about the position?
J.P. PATAFIO: Well, yeah. Because most people that take the bus want to get from point A to point B as quick as possible. So I don't think they really see sometimes the operator as the person that's responsible for the 40 foot or 60 foot vehicle or the various things they have to consider when they're driving the bus. They just see them as part of the machine. They expect the operator to perform. Frankly, if they have no head, if it was autonomous. That's simply not the case. When you're driving the bus, not only do you have the responsibility of everybody in that bus, you also have the responsibility for people outside of the bus. It's kind of amazing. I know when I was driving, I would finish a day's work, and I would feel like I lifted 10,000 pounds. I was exhausted. And I couldn't understand it at first because I wasn't doing any concrete labor. I was driving the bus. Sometimes I think people think you're sitting behind the wheel and it's an easy job. It's extremely stressful job. And you work in an office. If you have a stomach ache, you get up from your desk and you go to the bathroom. I'm in the middle of the route going from Bay Ridge to prospect park. I don't have that luxury. I have a bus load of people. I have to make it to the destination on time. I just can't stop the bus. And I think sometimes the public --

I don't really expect them to understand. They just want to get from point A to point B. If there's any type of inconvenience the operator is the first one they turn to. What's wrong? What's going on? Why are you stopping? Sometimes even though I agree with you it's a public space, and I think in many ways it's a sacred public space and something you should protect. In particular public mass transit. Sometimes people don't get that. Sometimes they just want to get to where they want to get to. And they expect you to do it. And they don't see you as a person. They just see you as part of the machine.
NATHAN VASS: Just to add onto that, yes, I absolutely agree. Especially the physical toll aspect. I am surprised when friends of mine who don't drive buses are themselves surprised that driving a bus would be physically taxing. It's not just that you're man handling the steering wheel and so on but the amount of brain power you're exerting anticipating turns or other maneuvers before they happen. The amount of mental processing there is exhausting. And imagine if you're driving an 8 hour road trip every day, except in an industrial vehicle with people.
Yeah, as far as the A to B thing we often describe bus drivers as that. The person who transports someone from A to B. I tend to resist that definition instead favoring the thought of your job is to get people from -- to transport them safely between points A and points B. You don't have to get them to point B. You're not going to be penalized if you fail to do so but you're supposed to be safe and offering a good customer experience right now on this block. And in king County we emphasize that with a hierarchy of things we prioritize being safety rather than schedule which is what would be first if that were the actual definition of a bus driver.

KEISHA FARRELL: I'm going to jump in. Understanding everything that you guys are saying, I spend many, many hours sitting in bus depots, riding buses, and doing all that great stuff. I had notes before I came here and you touched on all of them. The thing I hear most from operators is how much they need to pee. Especially if they're on the street. It's difficult for people in general to understand that. Like you said. I work in a planning group but I spend a lot of time with operators. If we're in this meeting and I don't like what you're saying to me, I can still get up and go to the bathroom. The operator doesn't have the luxury of doing that. It's really important, especially when working with the service development group and our schedulers to understand, I get that you're trying to squeeze this run together but you need to understand it's an actual human being at the end of this run. They have family, they have lives. They need to get up and walk around the bus when they get to the terminal point for the lay over. They can't sit on the bus through the well paved streets of Baltimore. It's like driving on carpet. It's beautiful. But 8 hours on end. It's really difficult trying to humanize bus drivers. It's a human person. One of the biggest frustrations I find when I'm working with a service development group is when they create a run. I say this is a false run. It says the run will end at 3:30 in the afternoon and you know when you're looking at the run, he's never getting back at 3:30. It's never going to happen. And you're trying -- because we have a schedule review committee made up of bus operators and we sit with them and we go through the schedules. Now I have to be like a policeman over the service department, you have to change this. When people pick a run that ends at 3:30 it's because they have something to do. They have a life outside of the bus. It's important for them to understand, you can clock out at 3:30 and you don't care what

happens. This operator is still on the bus. They still have to pick up their kid from day care, make it back to the bus division. That's the part that's frustrating. Some people say I'm a bleeding heart. I'm really not. But I'm a bleeding heart for people. We have lives. Trying to explain to the planning group and making them understand when you have these brilliant ideas, make these wonderful plans, at the end there's an actual human being we have to take into consideration, that we have to make sure we're accommodating all the needs. Like we would want someone to think about us. I spend a lot of time doing that. More than I care to, to be honest.

J.P. PATAFIO: You should work with transit.

(Laughter).

Sorry, Ira. I'm not trying to knock you out of your job. When you make a schedule, bus operating, a 35 minute swing on the road. It isn't like they get 35 minutes to the minute. You may get to the relief point late, by five minutes. The person relieving you may get there late by five minutes. They still expect you to get to the relief point five minutes early because you have to inspect the bus. Sometimes you have a 20, 25 minute meal time. We don't have 8 hour days. Our average is 9 and-a-half hours. The Bronx is around 10 hours on average. That means we're driving a vehicle about 7 and-a-half, sometimes a little bit longer. That's a very long day. It's exhausting. You don't have a meal. Physical toll. What happens to an operator as they age? They have to get their medical -- unlike when you started the job, today there are a lot of restrictions. Hypertension, blood pressure, vision, diabetes. A whole list of things. But if you don't have time to really eat properly, you don't have time to sleep properly and you're sitting down which when you talk about ergonomics, one of the most unhealthy positions to be in all day is sitting. They say that. You're not only sitting, you're stressed because you're driving. You have to get from point A to point B. It is safety first but the reality is it's also schedule. We're schedule driven. That's what we do. People rely on us to get to school, to get to work. We're on a schedule so we try to make that schedule work. That's added stress. It's like working under a deadline. Anybody who works under a deadline knows how stressful that is. A deadline is stress. Then that takes a toll. You have 15 years on a job, don't be surprised at how many operators go out IOD, carpal tunnel syndrome, gets knocked out, now doesn't have a wage. These things happen. It's a fact. The class that I came in with, 20 to 25 percent of them no longer work in transit for one reason or another, it takes a toll.

NATHAN VASS: There's such a push pull between schedulers and operators in my organization. To the point where when schedulers come in to the base to interface with operators, because of course that would be a good idea for those two groups to communicate, there is so much animosity, and fear that the schedulers have requested that union people be present for their safety. Because they're so concerned about being yelled at. And it gets so personal because of these very real issues which we're discussing. And there's -- on one hand there's the operator expressing things that are very easy to understand. Such as what we're talking about here. And then there's the service planner who has got his hands tied -- the scheduler, excuse me, who has got his hands tied because he doesn't have access to the funding, or adding one minute of running time to all of the trips on this route cost tens of thousands of dollars a day and they don't have that. It really helps when we operators are made privy to that information. We did a massive restructure a couple of years ago, also in 2017.

KEISHA FARRELL: Fun, right?
NATHAN VASS: Yeah. Very exciting. They made these little booklets that explained to the bus drivers why these changes were being made. I found that so helpful. One of the elements that was brought up when I was first interviewed is can you follow directions without asking why? Can you just do something? Because there are going to be positions -- times in the job where you just have to do that. This doesn't make sense. Do it anyway. We'll explain it later. And it was so helpful for that service change too that they thought of not only the public, but also the drivers. Here is why we're doing this to this route. Not just when people ask me, you don't know what to say. But also because your job matters and we care about you. It was a wonderful gesture. And I hope that in the future service changes, that's something that becomes a norm because it was not a norm at the time. Very exciting when it happened.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: Keisha, your position is pretty unique across agencies. Since you started have you seen an improvement between drivers and planners in their relationship?
KEISHA FARRELL: Yeah, kind of. It depends. It's funny, one of my colleagues Ken is here with me. I was complaining -- sorry, not complaining, expressing my frustration about being always in the cross hairs. I literally sit in the firing squad. If the bus drivers aren't yelling and screaming at me because the service planners and schedulers didn't do something, then management is screaming and yelling at me because I said something to the union that they probably didn't want the union to know and I come from a place of full transparency. Bus drivers are not stupid. Not by any stretch. A lot of them are transit, and they love what they do or they wouldn't be here. They have to because I would never volunteer to drive a bus.
NATHAN VASS: It's so fun.
(Laughter).

KEISHA FARRELL: Again, it's still this idea of humanizing people. So it has gotten better. We have been telling our service planners that you have to come out to tell the bus operators. We just had a service change on February -- whatever the first Sunday in February was. Super Bowl Sunday. We're going to change that going forward. FYI do not do service changes when something major is happening like the Super Bowl. Because the Monday after it was an absolute storm. Fill in the blank.
(Laughter).
It was like we made these service changes. For the first time in the Winter service change of last year which we'd never done before as an agency, like I said I spent a lot of time with bus operators and we took all their feedback and 30 percent of all the changes we made to the service were directly from the feedback that we got from our bus operators. That was huge. When they were telling me we can't make this journey because we have to go across three lanes of traffic to make a left turn, service planners are not out there. They literally are the eyes. A lot of service planners don't ride the service. They live in Maryland. They can drive. Getting that type of feedback, taking it seriously, thinking about the fact that the operators are not just driving the bus to get to point A to B, but thinking about ways to do it safely, making the service more efficient. Places where we only pick up one or two passengers, why don't we eliminate the bus stop. The more time we need for service. All those things we try to take into consideration when I'm sitting talking to them. Now the service planner, you have no choice,

you have to talk to them. We do not need union representation to protect them. That's not necessary because I am there. I am like the shield for everyone. They yell at me. I'm like in the middle so you can stop yelling now because they can hear you. They're right at the table. Perfect. Yell at them. What's also really great about the way our process work, our administrator Kevin Quinn, is a huge advocate. We need to talk to our front line employees, make sure they're happy. Because even though we probably still will have a job without them, it would really suck because again I'm not driving the bus. It's really important to him. He comes out to the divisions with us. He does coffee with Quinn networking things and then he will speak to the operators directly about things that need to be fixed. It took a lot of doing. For many years they would tell us something is a problem and no one would take the time to fix it. We spend a lot of time communicating back to the operators, explaining to them why we did something, why we didn't do something, what it would cost us. Enter the wrench. If you were making this decision, bus operator, how would you do it differently? Because it's really important to bring them into the process. And to have them understand sometimes why those types of decisions are made. And unlike a lot of people we're not an authority. We work under MDOT so we don't really have the power to do a lot of things as an agency because we might come up with great plans and at the end of the day MDOT is going to tell us, no, it's not going to happen. Also explaining that to the operators that we're puppets just as they're puppets in this whole process.

What's really fascinating, and I've learned a lot from bus operators, it's when they ask you to come ride with them. Because they really want you to understand what it's like. So I've ridden many routes, at really ridiculous hours of the morning, interface with the public who don't want to pay the fare. Listen you're not actually paying the operator when you pay the fare but you're putting him in a tight position. This is his job trying to alleviate that. One thing I learned, when our operators feel they can trust us and we have their back and we will be there to support them when things go wrong in the field then they're more willing to communicate with us honestly. To sit down and really now we're at the point where the changes we're making are valuable. They impact the service in a positive way and we're seeing more positive interactions. I think I mentioned earlier, for the first time -- I've been doing this four years. We had our award ceremony yesterday for the operators. An operator emailed me on Monday, I didn't recognize the email address. He was like how do I recognize a coworker who did something amazing and I think I fell out of my chair. What the hell? Which is really cool. These are people I was trying to convince that us recognizing them was a good thing and they had so much distrust for us as an agency and so much distrust that we would not listen to them and we wouldn't take them seriously, that when we finally started doing it, they're literally blowing my mind with how forthcoming they are with things, and the comments that they love what they do. That's what that's like for me.

J.P. PATAFIO: I think you touched on something really important. It's called participation. There's always a rub. When you talk to an operator, and we have a redesign going on now, management ask to speak to the operators, and we set it up that they could do so. Always -- they always talk about their job and how to improve it. And they would absolutely like to be more involved. And then there's a block. That's a structural thing. You have labor relations. Watch what you say. Be careful what you do. And then you have other restrictions that block

this participation. That's something more fundamental to the system that's a little bit more complicated perhaps to get around. But it's something that is in a way prevents a more collaborative relationship between the operators and those that do the planning.
It's a shame. I'm not quite sure how to get around it. But most certainly operators are -- I was just in a depot today and they were talking about a 20 minute headway and how ridiculous that is because you're around the B16 coming through Brooklyn and it ain't working and they talk about all the other stresses that come along. I'm like 20 minute headway. Anyone in planning knows you ain't getting service with a 20 minute headway. By the time they get on the bus they're pissed off. This idea of participation is one that we always try to figure out.
KEISHA FARRELL: One of the things that we're doing -- we're planning our summer service change right now. Like I said, it's like four years in the making. Our schedule committee, they're made up of operators and shop stewards. They're going to sit with our schedulers and they're going to witness for the first time how we block runs. This is really important. Because when we review schedules they're already made. There's not a lot of change that can be made at that point in time. But maybe -- at that point in time. But maybe involving them in the process. It's not easy. We have four bus divisions, 60 some odd lines, Metro, light rail, and they all have to work together. What's really worked for us -- first of all we just had a change in our union leadership and the relationship is actually pretty good. It's better than I think anyone could have hoped for. They're very open to working with us and being collaborative. Yes there are those union struggles that always exist. But if we can't work together to make things better for the operator, at the end of the day the operator is on the street, they're the ones who get yelled at, interfacing with the public. If all the people who sit in offices can't sit down and find a way to make that work, then we can all just stay home. What's the point? What's the point of coming every day? Right? So they're going to sit through this run block process with us, going to see what the schedulers are doing. They're going to advise the schedulers because they've never driven a bus. How many people ever actually sat and read a bus schedule? Like read a paddle? You guys are operators. I work in an office of 40 people and I think three of them can read a paddle. But they're planning for everyone. That's a problem. That's a real problem. How are you going to make a plan for someone that you don't understand what they do? Like I said I spend a lot of time getting up at two in the morning and sitting with the starter and working his entire shift with him, walking the yard. How do you assign buses? In order to help them I needed to understand the language they were speaking and translate that back to executive management. You really need to understand what it's like to live this life. When an operator shows up at three in the morning they're not getting home before 4 in the afternoon. That's a 12 hour day at least right there. I don't know how they do it because I need sleep. Generally speaking. I'm pretty pleasant but I can get cranky. It's a bit much. Then you have all the other things, like absenteeism, the abuse of FML. One of the things we're doing is instead of penalizing, more of a corrective action. This is why we do this. Recently we've experienced an increase in on time performance. It's gone from being in the mid50s -- to like 79. It's awesome. (Laughter).
It's like really, really good. The thing that's great about that is we go back to the bus divisions, hey operators, remember all the things we were trying to change, you need to show up on time, don't leave early, make sure you leave time points on time. Make passengers know I'm still

sitting here because of x, y and z. Then we can tell the bus operators all the things that were a burden, this is the end result. Our buses are 80 percent reliable. When that is the case people are getting way less phone calls. People are less cranky. Everybody is happier. Now the city has to deal with crime. That's not our problem. But the union relationship is important.
DAWN DISTLER: Listening to you guys talk, because that was more fun for me actually. The first thing I learned is you're Switzerland and I need to hire you to come to Ohio. But listening to you guys talk, what I hear and what we're trying to change is the culture. We're trying to change the culture right now in Akron. We did the same thing in Knoxville. Because what I believe in is that everybody needs to understand what everybody does. As a leader, if I'm setting people up to fail, I don't care bus operator, planner, scheduler, maintenance, if I'm giving them expectations that are unreal, and unattainable, then I'm not a very good leader. I'm not going to say that is easy to do. It's not easy to do. You have to be able to balance it. But let's balance it so that the bus operator -- people know the bus operator is a person; that people know the scheduler is a person. We're doing things like allowing bus operators to come sit in the different dispatch offices so they can see what the dispatcher goes through as well as give some advice on hey, this is why this operator is telling you this. The other thing we're doing is ours are also part of the schedules, and when we change schedules we show them what we're going to do. We don't just change them and say here, this is what we're going to do. Check that out. We actually bring them in before that. We run it. We look at it. We're actually implementing a new software right now and they're part of that. We try to make sure bus operators are part of our RFP process. As well as maintenance, they help us, they're on the RFP panel. They help us choose a bus, choose a seat. They help us to understand what it is that they're going through. You can talk about -- I remember having this conversation one time with one of the procurement folks in Nashville. This gentleman who is an awesome guy but he said, well, if I put in -- all the bus operators really wanted as a cup holder. That's what they wanted. You're not allowed to drink while you're driving the bus but it's there. When you stop you can get a drink because you get thirsty. Where else are they going to put their drink that isn't going to fall all over the place. I remember that. Sitting it up in the corner praying it didn't fall on me. It's like all you want is that. That costs $10 more a bus. God forbid you spend ten more bucks on a bus that you're paying probably half a million dollars for. Where are you balancing morale here? (Laughter).
To have everybody be part of the solution, and as leaders not set people up to fail, that's something that we have to think of. My directors, they go out and they have to actually plan a trip on a bus. Now, when I said that, I didn't realize that all my directors were going to either plan it around breakfast or lunch. But we always go to a meal somehow. But we're out there. And we're riding on the bus. And we're seeing things and they're looking at stuff. It's no longer okay, I'm not the one pointing out everything. I'm not the one saying hey, did you see that there's graffiti on that bus stop sign? Hey, did you see that seat is broken? Hey, did you hear the announcement doesn't work? That's okay. No, it's not okay. Now they're pointing it out to each other. Grab that before she sees it. Because they want to do it before I do. It's kind of like a running game now.
But really, if we're not in the trenches and we're not out there and talking and actually then making changes, you can go out and talk all you want. You can have all the chats with the CEO

over coffee that you want. But if you don't have some action behind that, when a maintenance guy says the lifts don't work, well then I'm sure as hell buying you new lifts. I'm going to find the money somewhere. Then I'm going to finance and saying find the money. We need to buy new lifts but I'm also going to put a policy in place this is how you take care of the lifts. I just gave them to you. They're brand new. You earned them. You need good stuff to work with. I want to make sure the bus operator doesn't have a seat that's broken, tore up. Why do they want to get into a bus and sit down in something that's tore up? You want to go to your house and sit on a couch that's all tore up? Probably not. We need to make sure that we're talking to each other but then there's action behind it and as leaders we're making sure there's action and what actions can be done. If we say there's a time line for something, then you have to -- if you say it, you got to then bring it. That's just all there is to it. If you are going to say it, you got to bring it.

NATHAN VASS: Just to follow up on something you were saying, Keisha. I love what a gesture of respect it is for you guys to talk to the operators and ask them about their ideas. That sounds amazing. At king County we have a lot of emphasis on driver customer relations and remembering that respect has enormous currency on the street. And that's how I am able to drive the routes I drive in the time of night I drive them because I know that I look 12. And how you make that work is by respecting people. But respect -- in addition to having enormous currency on the street, also is relevant in the office, in an administrative environment. If drivers felt more respected, and encouraged to share their views, there's such a massive resource of information. They have an enormous wealth of information. I'd love to go a little further into that later. But our schedulers at king County are former operators. And you would think the reason for that stipulation being in the hiring is obvious. And you would think that because of that there would be less friction. But you know, as time goes by you forget about those days sitting on third avenue, and I love that -- I love this idea of bringing the folks out onto the vehicles, creating that sense of communication and acknowledgement and respect that we at least at king County so easily understand between drivers and passengers but also taking that one level further with administration and operators.

CHRIS VAN EYKEN: So at the current moment across the US agencies are experiencing driver shortages. What are some things that we can do to improve the jobs, making them more attractive and get more people in the driver's seat?

NATHAN VASS: Somebody want to take that?

(Laughter).

J.P. PATAFIO: Most people take the job because it's going to earn them a living. If you pay people right, and the progression to top pay isn't as long as it is maybe in some areas, people take a job first and foremost, they want a good wage, good benefit, and they want to be able to raise their family. I think that's central. The second thing is they want to work in a place that's respectful, and kind of -- when you walk in, it's clean, it's comfortable. And there's an environment of comraderie. I think that's very important. And driving the bus, again, it's not your typical nine to five job. So you have to figure out -- balance the need of ability to make that living and make that money, and also the ability of just not being exhausted because I know

availability is always an issue. I think that is tied in with the stresses of the job. Those are some things that I would say.
DAWN DISTLER: First of all, when I -- knock on wood, we don't have a problem. Retaining --
KEISHA FARRELL: What?
(Laughter).

DAWN DISTLER: Retaining employees. First of all, everybody is part of the team. We try to make sure that everybody feels like they're part of the team. I totally agree with you. We try to treat people with respect. The first two weeks that I was back in Akron, I totally remember -- I have never forgotten what it's like to be a bus operator. First of all, because I think being a bus operator was the best job I ever had. As much as I still love what I do now, it was the best job that I ever had. And I totally want to make sure that people understand that it's a great job. But I also want them to understand it is a job. It's a hard job. That is why we pay our folks with what we consider fairly well and they seem to consider fairly well. They come to work. But I walked in the first two weeks and I walked into -- we call our bus operators break room the bull pen. There's a good reason for that. There's a lot of bull that gets slunk around back there. Even when I was back there. That happened 30 years ago. We sling a lot of bull. But here is one of the things that I notice. I'm walking around, every morning I come in, I walk around the bull pen, say hello, ask people how they're doing. Sometimes they tell me, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they want to talk, sometimes they don't. Sometimes I agree with them, sometimes I don't but I'm always honest with them.
When I'm looking around, I'm looking at this bull pen, and there's like two couches that I am positive were there when I left 25 years ago. And they look like they were there 25 years ago.
(Laughter).
They actually are tore up, the cushions are coming out of it and stuff. That kind of crap. And the tables are broken. If you look at the table, if you even try to put something on it, it wobbles and things like that. It just so happened the procurement manager came walking through right as I'm down there talking to everybody. And I said hey Dana, come over here. And she looked at me and goes yeah, what's up? There was a bus operator sitting there. And I said I'm going to ask Stephanie a question. And I want you to stand here while she answers you because I want you to hear this. Because I know what she's going to say in my head. And I said Stephanie, what do you think of that couch? She goes I don't sit on that couch. And I said okay. Because you don't want to? Because you don't sit? Tell me about that couch. She said, I'm afraid to sit on that couch.
(Laughter).
That scares me too. I said tell Dana why you're afraid to sit on the couch. She said you know when all that cushion and stuff is coming out, I have no idea what the hell is on that. She said it could be anything. We don't know even a bus operator, we don't know what people bring back from their houses. I said so what you're telling me is that that represents how I feel about you. Yeah. And so I looked at Dana and I said fix it. Fix it. I called maintenance. I said can you fix that table? I can fix that when but I can't fix that one. Great. I look at Dana. Fix it. My finance Director was having a fit because I spent a lot of money the first few weeks I was there. But that

buys you in people caring and coming to work. Of course they look at me and say do you want me to repair it or replace it? I went it's your job. You figure that out. You do what's best.
But I know that we have new tables and I know we have new chairs and I know that we have new couches. And I do know that -- if I see somebody sitting on the table, I tell them. Get off the table. That's what the chair is for. Sit on the chair, not on the table. They don't get mad at me because I do that because they know we spent more money on the tables. They just forgot and are on the table now. Again, if you don't care about the people on your team and you're not willing to invest in them -- I go to all these meetings with Mayors and representatives and Congressmen and all this. I tell them they need to invest in the transit system. You know what? So the hell do I? I have to invest in the transit system too. My part of investing in it is the people. And you have to invest in the people so that they go out and they sell exactly what you're selling. The service that's out there. And that way people want to invest in us.
KEISHA FARRELL: I can do better than you. Couches are a big deal at bus divisions. A huge deal. Our bus operators basically will raise funds and then buy themselves a couch, a refrigerator, a big screen television no one is watching, ever. But they paid for it. Ken, who is in the audience, and works in our administrator's office, he had a really good idea. We're going to procure some couches for all of the bus divisions. How long did it take you?
>> Longer than it should have. A few months.
KEISHA FARRELL: Because we're a state agency we had to go through MCE, we had preferred partners. The couches cost us an arm and a leg. They were awful. When we first got them, the operators complained because they were hard and couldn't sit -- they were really awful. Really were. One of them literally was falling apart and Ken and I picked it up and threw it in the back of the SUV. Struggling through the door. We ended up getting a credit card and went to Costco and got some sweet couches that had plugs in them, and they reclined, and they did all these amazing things.
DAWN DISTLER: Didn't cost you near as much.
KEISHA FARRELL: Not even. Then we were like super heros. They got us couches! And we looked really good. So you're right, this investment, the idea of investing in your employees is a great one. We just redid a bunch of of the bathrooms at the bus divisions. People were complaining there was rust, they were afraid of getting at the time tetanus. We just added sanitizer because everyone is afraid they're going to get covid. It's not going to happen. Don't get historical. We just put in all these hand sanitizers everywhere. Everyone is sure that they're going to die from from the commuter vans. They're not. It's great. Kevin comes down and talks to people. One thing that Kevin really does, I'm now starting to see I'm just a pawn in the game, he'll go out with coffee and he'll bring the coffee and donuts and he's a hero. They ask a question. He does a two finger shooting thing. And then he just hands the person off to me and disappears. Somehow I have a new task. It's amazing.
(Laughter).
I'm running around trying to figure it out but it works really well because they trust him. That's a big part in investing in our people, gaining their trust. Now it's a really fun experience. I'm going to give you a side bar story and then pass this on. I was going to the Billy Joel concert in the summer, last summer in Baltimore. The concert let out somewhere after one in the morning and I'm walking with my husband, we're crossing the street. Of course the bus runs 24 hours. As

I'm crossing the street oblivious because I'm slightly inebriated, the horn is blowing. I'm singing. I'm having a great time. And a bus is honking, and I'm thinking I'm doing something wrong. The operator is just waiving at one something in the morning. Hey.
(Laughter).
Not tomorrow. But again, that's the trust building, that now we have with the operators. They would yell across the street, in the street, have you seen Kevin Quinn? It's really good for our agency, helped with morale. Investing in people, it's a slow and tedious process. We're not always successful. Don't get me wrong. But generally the feeling, the vibe of the agency is shifting more towards the right, that bell curve is moving towards the right which is where we want it to be. They are an integral part of the process and we want to make sure they know that. We have what we call the feedback loop. Everything that we collect from them, they fill out a form, we assign a number to it, we put a response on it and then we go back, hey operator X, you said X, Y and z and we did this. This is how it's going to impact your run. We thought this lay over was unsafe because of its location, we've done that, and changed the lay over completely, moved it, because now it's time to put their safety -- safety first -- we have to put their safety above everything else. Because if they don't feel safe they're not going to trust us and it builds animosity between the two factions. We're all one MTA. We all have the same goal of moving people between A and B, C and D, and we want to make sure everyone is getting what they need out of it.
J.P. PATAFIO: I'm with the New York City transit authority. God bless. We had a thing called the employment recognition program.
KEISHA FARRELL: We have one of those.
J.P. PATAFIO: We had one of those too and they cut it. The apple. The dinners. But they don't do it anymore. They stopped doing it from 2010. Because there was a financial crisis. And we go back to them and say not that we care a lot about your apples but a lot of members appreciate when you're appreciated. It's morale. It can't be that much because every now and then you get a lunch, a belt buckle, you maybe get a jacket. You drive ten years without an accident. They killed it. It's sad because that is a gesture, believe it or not, when you give an operator a jacket, or a belt buckle, or a ring for being there for 20 years, a little dinner with his wife, tremendous how much they look forward to that. And we cannot convince them to reestablish it. We'll do a little rally, I'll bring you to be one of our speakers. It's nice to hear that. I hope that kind of travels its way about two blocks up and about 29 stories over. Right over there. Because it counts. It really does.
NATHAN VASS: I couldn't agree more. Morale is not something that can be monetized. So elements that help it sometimes get cut but it's so valuable. It's these nonquantifiable benefits that are hard to explain to a stock board member meeting but it couldn't be more important. The couches, that's huge. The couches are huge. And trying to explain that to someone who is not there is difficult.
We have a pretty good management team that tries to reward this sort of thing. They're aware that they want to do something to let operators know they're doing a good job besides promoting them out of their jobs. Let's not just get rid of all the great operators. Recognize they're good. The jacket, the dinner, these are big things. I had a whole team of king County brass show up on my bus one day with video cameras, to congratulate me because I had won something that

was related to bus driving. They just bombed my bus basically. It wasn't my night shift but hey that's okay. They showed up during the day. And just wanted to express to the passengers and myself in a manner of total surprise we appreciate you. That meant a lot. I remember stuff like that.
Our general manager does these sort of Town Hall things where he comes around to the different bases and talks to the operators about things they're interested in such as planning, or finance, making sure the drivers have an opportunity to be heard. Again it's a morale thing. To be heard but also to know, equity. It's a big deal.
I also wanted to double up on what you were saying, dawn, about loving the job. While we're talking about all the stress and not being able to use the rest room and everything else, those are real concerns but I love this job. It is so much fun. It is so absurd. And so ridiculous. And so fantastic. Most jobs you have some idea what's going to happen in the next month or two months. Here you have no clue what's going to happen in the next five minutes and you thrive on it. I try to tell myself I'm going to take my break while I'm driving the route because I may not get the break at the end. I'm going to enjoy myself right now. We don't get penalized for running late because you just can't do that.
Yeah. Take it as it comes and make the best of it. A lot of other operators do. But with that line of thinking, that's an effective form of approach when you cannot control what the stresses are. Such as traffic, or fares, or schedule. It's not an effective line of approach when you can control, such as when you're in a position to change the schedule. Or alter the routing. I think that is one of the areas where that's why there's a lack of communication between operators and service and scheduling. Because we as bus drivers, our method of survival is to just go along with it. We can't control it: We're just going to get through the day and maintain our sanity. But sometimes we forget via that mindset that we have the opportunity to complain about certain things. There are forms that we can fill out. But instead of filling them out we're just like gosh, we made it through the day. Wasn't that fantastic? Let's get out of here.
(Laughter).
There's some method of interlining those two very healthy methods of approach. You guys know what I'm saying. I'll stop talking.
KEISHA FARRELL: I like your form of saying. To piggyback on both you and Dawn. What's important is when someone fills out a form it doesn't fall into the black hole of forms. That's what we called the service group. The forms would go to service development never to be seen again. What happened? So again, it's really important that even if you can find that person at your agency who is responsible for making people accountable, accountability is the name of the game. Not just for the service development teams or for the schedulers or planners but also for bus operators. Accountability. Because I don't know what's going on in your route because I'm not on the route. Even if I go on the bus, unless I go for an entire run, I'm only riding between where I'm trying to get to and where I'm coming from. I don't care what happens after I get off because I'm where I need to be. If you guys don't tell me what to do, you're going to leave it up to the people who know nothing to make that decision for you. That's not a good solution at all. So if you're telling me that this dead head route sucks because we gave you 18 minutes and if you're not going to give me more time then I need to change the route I'm not

going to know that if you go into the bull pen and tell everyone in the bull pen but don't tell the people to actually change it. We have a lot of break room lawyers. They know nothing.
J.P. PATAFIO: And they're cheap.
(Laughter).

DAWN DISTLER: Mine aren't cheap.
KEISHA FARRELL: It's my favorite thing. I'll go in, they complain. Who did you tell? Forget the form. Did you even tell someone who matters? Because what will happen a lot of times, even if you tell a superintendent, they'll just call me, can you take a look at this? I'll give you a perfect example. I had an operator call me yesterday, on the pink line, because we changed all our buses. She's telling me something wonky is going on between 6:45 in the morning and 7:10 in the morning with the schedule. Now I can go on and look as far back as when we started the pink to five minutes ago and I can look at a replay of what happened on the route. All the buses out there, pull it up and look. She's telling me we started this run in February. Something is wrong, I'm getting slammed with the 7:10 departure. I'm picking up school kids. But the 7 o'clock bus leaving ahead of me is running empty. Can we shift them a couple of minutes to make things work? We're looking at it, I call a senior analyst, we're on the phone talking and as we look through all the buses that leave in that timeframe we discover there's a bus getting to its starting point late. The bus is being assigned on time. The operator is leaving the base on time but he can't seem to make it to that starting point on time. This is what's throwing everything off. It's throwing the entire thing off. So we're not going to get anyone in trouble because we require our operators, if something is happening on your run and it's not running the way it should, you need to tell someone so we can make the adjustment sooner rather than later. We don't want to get three months into the schedule and then can't change something. I tell the superintendent, when this operator comes in, simply ask him what's going on in the morning. I'm not telling them what I've observed but I want to hear what the operator says because we're probably going to change it. We need that push and pull. That feedback. And then we can make the change that benefits actually everyone leaving on those times because now the people will be happier. The operator will be happier. It's just more Kumbiya if you want to call it that. We have tools in place, data, technology. But this idea of bus operators in order for me to help you you have to tell me what's going on. You have to tell someone. Identify that person who is going to make people accountable for making sure that the change happens. That's where it gets really difficult -- the only people who like me are bus drivers and that's only on good days.
NATHAN VASS: What was the issue if you can share?
KEISHA FARRELL: I will share. It's quite fascinating. The service planning schedule has scheduled during peak service 18 minutes of dead head for this bus to get to the location in the a.m. peak. But in the midday peak they schedule 22 minutes. We see the problem. We're not accusing people. We're not in the business of accusing people. We're going to see what the operator says. We're going to take another look at it and make an unofficial change with the superintendent and tell them to instruct the operator to leave two minutes early from the division to see if it will make the impact that we think it will. If we can observe that for three days that it's what we need then we'll go ahead and make the change.
NATHAN VASS: I love that that amount of attention was brought to that one detail.

KEISHA FARRELL: She was just thinking about herself. We look at all of it. We're squeezing everything together to make the schedule work. The thing we try to explain to operators, we tell them do not manipulate the schedule. Please do not go out there and think you know best because we're building schedules based on ridership, passenger counts, time of day, traffic. So the service planners do have a good idea of what's happening but what we need are the eyes and ears on the street to tell us what we're not seeing. What we weren't seeing was there wasn't enough dead head time and we wouldn't have noticed it until she said she was getting killed at that time. It's stressful. I'm leaving people behind. I have school kids. That's the new approach for doing things for our agency. Everyone has to be on board. Everyone has to be responsible. Everyone has to be accountable for the part they play in the process.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: How do we get agencies that don't have a Keisha Farrell to take these lessons to mind and really take this seriously?
KEISHA FARRELL: I think it's important to sit with operators. The first thing that I'm going to tell you guys, I cried so much my first couple of months on that job. I swear I went home every day crying because operators would yell at me because it was all my fault. I just got here. I worked for state highway. We don't even look at buses. And it took a lot because it's about trust building. But you have to get your executives to put themselves in the shoes. You have to walk a mile in the shoes of these other people. Because it's not so easy and cushy as just getting up and driving the bus. I really do feel for our operators. I get on the bus with them. I'll sit in the back so the public doesn't recognize me. I'll wear my hood up sometimes so the operators don't recognize me because we're also observing their customer service and observing that they're following the rules and making sure things are going well. We'll call them on that. But not to penalize or punish them but as coachable moments because we want them to understand that we care and we want them to be the best operator they could be. It's changing the culture, changing that relationship. More parent/child and less over Lord I guess. You have to get them to come out into the field. You have to. No options.
J.P. PATAFIO: We had someone like that but they fired him. Yeah.
KEISHA FARRELL: It's wild. It's an amazing experience. Here is something really interesting. We do this meeting called BOPS. We've done it every two weeks for three years. A little less. We meet and literally look at every single thing. It stands for bus operations performance squad. And we meet every two weeks for about two hours. We bring our maintenance team. We bring our customer service team. We bring in marketing. We bring in bus operations, the police, and we talk about all the ways proactively that we can improve the service. That's the goal. We look at the attendance, we look at the on time performance, individual operators, patterns of behavior. We discover people like to stop in the morning and get an egg Mcmuffin. That's not allowed. You should be at the first stop. Whatever. We're just looking at data on the screen. Talking to people. Recently we started inviting operators to sit in on the meetings with us because they have this idea that we sit in this ivory tower. It's the 27th floor so it is a tour. We make decisions on their behalf. It's not what's going on. We're trying to make decisions that impact them in the most positive way possible. We bring them in. Come sit with us, see what we see and tell us what we're missing. They get to sit with the executive staff, administrator, COO, Director of bus operations, Director of maintenance and they're able to have the conversation with them. We take them seriously because again they're the people that

have to drive the bus. If they're telling you the shield is ineffective, then it is and we have to change that and we really have to make an effort to work towards that. The only other thing that would help that is the person on top, and we're lucky because our guy is amazing, he makes everyone do that. When he gives us a speech, everyone is really upset. So we're motivated to be better every time because he's going to be disappointed in us. There's nothing worse than when your dad is disappointed because he makes you feel like crap. No one likes that. That's definitely -- you can get the people up top to do that, it's about trickling and pushing the powers down. And empowering employees to do those things.
NATHAN VASS: Can I add to that? In terms of culture change, I think it does have to be the people at the top, enthusiastically infiltrating -- we have some problems reaching out to the communities about what they feel about service changes. North Seattle is different than south. North is more technologically integrated, more affluent. South Seattle does not reach out to Metro, as often, and let Metro know what they want the service to be even though they're more transit dependent. North Seattle is aware they have these options to change transit. A number of the folks where I drive in south Seattle are not aware of those options, or don't have time, et cetera to do that. Like fashion, the operators are not aware of the things that can be done. Both of these circumstances, it's got to be the people at the top, whether it's Metro reaching out to the people, passengers, or Metro trying to change the culture of the operators, just getting in there. Whether it's sending out a bunch of interns to learn about what the passengers think about the routes or riding buses like you say. We are experiencing a situation at Metro where there's a massive turn over and we have so many new operators that there's no opportunity for the older bus driving culture of caring about each other and working as a team to continue. We've changed our hiring system -- I think for the better -- because it used to be focused on can you drive gigantic commercial vehicles? We had a lot of exmilitary people? You know how to drive tanks? You're hired. Now it's different. Have you worked at target? We want you. They care more about customer service. You can't teach that as well. You can teach how to operate a vehicle but that's resulted in an unexpected change where yes, some of my older colleagues who are now retired, it's not unfair to say they were jerks to the people but they were really good at working together as bus drivers. When there was a traffic situation, or something was going on that was a calamity, you knew these other operators had your back. The new culture is pretty good about not getting phased with customer stuff, letting things roll off your back. Those are incredible skills, very valuable but you absolutely cannot rely on them to help you.
(Laughter).
That's a bummer. That's something that should perhaps be better addressed in training. And the way to do that when the culture is changing so quickly because of such a massive turn over you don't have the opportunity to let the older drivers further those ideas of working together. It's got to be management. And I hope that they're aware of these sort of cultural shifts because they're busy with so many things. Who is going to tell them?
J.P. PATAFIO: We have a slight different approach in the Transit Workers Union. We have a lot of -- our union has a lot of pride in trying to make sure that the members talk to us about, what we discuss with them gets moved. We have a strong culture of the union. We try to of course sometimes it rubs up against the labor relations side and the contract side but we had

tried to implement a program of mentorship. Because in transit you get about ten days of training and then you're put out into the street. So we decided to get mentors, people with 15 years training. Some officers back there could verify that. It's kind of crazy. So we started a mentor program. The program would link up a new operator to a senior operator who has had certain qualities. We try to really make this program grow. This mentorship program grow. It takes a certain amount of resistance because within every institution there are pockets. People want to protect their own little fiefdom. I do this, this is my world. We're rubbing up maybe in someone's title work or someone's authority. But we feel with our union, we have the expertise. We want to be able to use that expertise. Sometimes it's a bit of a tension between management, which has its roles and its structural boundaries. And the union, which kind of pushes up on it. And they kind of push back. Sometimes there's that tension there. So we have a mentor program that started off good. One manager leaves that's really into it. And then it just starts to become the same old same old. We're really losing that value that you could get from the senior operator that has a lot of experience to the new operator. That's very important.
NATHAN VASS: That value is there. And it could be used.
J.P. PATAFIO: Absolutely. It's a hundred percent there because the junior operator would know I'm going to call so and so and I have a problem. They really help because they're another level of the union that could help make sure the operator gets through some hard times and we want to try to reward them. How do you reward the mentors? Unfortunately sometimes it doesn't work out. That means sometimes the manager that's more innovative, and more competent, like if I succeed you succeed, and if you succeed I succeed. That person leaves and it could become a problem.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: I want to give some time for audience questions. JP, the benefits of the public. How do we talk more about the benefits for bus lanes towards bus drivers and their job? How does it make it easier? I can repeat it.
KEISHA FARRELL: We're sorry.
NATHAN VASS: No talking in class. (Many voices).
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: A position on bus lanes. Conversation around bus lanes tends to focus on the benefits to riders. How do we talk about the benefits it provides to bus drivers and how do we use that to make bus drivers advocates for better service?
J.P. PATAFIO: Great question.
KEISHA FARRELL: It's a great question.
J.P. PATAFIO: I think bus lanes -- when you're an operator, you always think about safety. Right? And you think about how much stress you're going to encounter on the route. How many bubble parked cars and UPS trucks and so on. Double parked cars. You think about the schedule. At the end of the line you could take that little bit of a break and stretch, and you get ready for the next run. Bus lanes, it's a very difficult thing to get in New York City. The transit authority may like them but the DOT is run by the Mayor, MTA is run by the Governor. I'm like England or London where the Mayor controls the roads or transit. We don't have that. But when I talk to the operators they understand because the bus lane is safer. If you know there's a bus lane and you don't have to Zig in and out of lanes, it becomes easier to drive that vehicle. You could pay more attention and you know I'm going to have a dedicated bus lane. I'm going

to be able to move forward. I don't have to worry about the double parked cars on east 18th Street by the D train because it is crazy. It's like the Brooklyn buses. I know this.
(Laughter).
At first, operators may not have thought about a bus lane. But when they get on the bus lane, like the M15 or the 46, they like the bus lane and then they talk about enforcing the bus lanes because now they understand this works. So yeah. This makes my job easier. And it makes my job safer. And I think it becomes easier to sell. Who is not going to love that? 14th Street, the bus -- we love it. Eastern parkway in Utica, it is crazy over there.
(Applause).
The vans, and the bus operations -- don't work. And if we can get a bus way, clear it out, that would be awesome. That's what we're trying to do. That's what we advocate. And it's very difficult because you run into small business owners, and the parking spot in front of their store is worth a million dollars.
DAWN DISTLER: Because that's where they park.
(Laughter).

J.P. PATAFIO: I don't know why it's so valuable. But it is. And then you have the community boards, a lot of the small businesses play a large role in the community boards and the riding public doesn't really get involved in the fight. So we always try to figure out how to get the riding public -- what do we move in Brooklyn? How many people a day?
>> Depends on the route.
J.P. PATAFIO: Total about?
>> I don't know off the top of my head.
J.P. PATAFIO: 200,000? A bit more. That's a tremendous resource. I know Larry at ETU, rest in peace, he understood that as a resource. If we could figure out ways to work with the public because they want it, and we want it, that's magical -- maybe we can get past the small business owners and other obstacles -- I'm not belittling the small business owner. To own a business in New York City is very difficult.
NATHAN VASS: Heroic act.
J.P. PATAFIO: We want to find that, but we want to move people quickly and safely and with as little stress as possible.
KEISHA FARRELL: We added bus lanes in 2017 when we designed our bus network. There was a lot of resistance at first and now they love them. We used paint. Because the bus lanes are red and now the paint is disappearing.
>> They'll be back in the spring.
KEISHA FARRELL: We've gotten a lot of questions about repainting the bus lanes. The biggest problem we have is enforcement. You guys have cameras. Thank you for the idea. We're definitely looking at that. It's a big thing.
J.P. PATAFIO: You can buy a lot of couches with those cameras.
KEISHA FARRELL: They really should be on the street. We are looking at that. In addition to the fact that we started off with just warning people when they were parked in the bus lanes and driving in the bus lanes. Warnings we found were not effective. So we just went straight to

tickets. Our tickets are pretty expensive, about 200 bucks. 250. In Maryland that's a lot of money.
J.P. PATAFIO: A lot of couch.
KEISHA FARRELL: Yeah. It's a lot of money, $250 for a ticket. Funny enough on my way here tonight I jumped on the bus up to Penn Station. And there were five vehicles parked in the bus stop where I was getting on the bus. The operator started talking to me like this is just ridiculous. Don't worry, I'll call the police. I did call the police. Listen. It's good to know people. Hey Lieutenant, this is Keisha, how are you? Hey. I thought you were going to New York. I am. By the way, on Charles street there are five cars in the bus lane. They sent someone down there. It's great. I have to use that power that I wield judiciously.
(Laughter).
That's the biggest thing. We are in the process of adding I think about 15 more miles of dedicated bus lane in the city. That's really important. Something around that. Roughly 15 miles.
Like you said, we don't own the streets. We are run by the Governor and the city of Baltimore owns the streets. It's a fine balance between how much bus lane we can have but we also added things like transit priority to help with the buses getting through downtown. And when we redesign the network we moved buses -- we had most service on one street and we kind of spread that across the city to also help ease the congestion. We did a couple of things. Operators really love the bus lanes. They don't like the bikes so much in the bus lanes but that's a big shift for us. Change is difficult, especially for people who have been doing the same thing for a long time.
DAWN DISTLER: I have nothing to say.
(Laughter).

KEISHA FARRELL: I'm moving to Ohio.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: I'll jump off with another question. As a cyclist it's scary riding next to a bus. I'm sure it's stressful for bus operators too. Can you think of any bus lane or bus stop design that would make mixing between the two easier, less stressful for both the rider and driver?
J.P. PATAFIO: First of all I wouldn't have a bike lane and a bus lane as much as possible on the same street. It's just -- doesn't work. It can be very, very -- it's dangerous frankly. It's an accident -- if there's an accident with those two, it's a problem. And then it becomes a conflict.
NATHAN VASS: They often move at the same speed with stopping --
J.P. PATAFIO: We have a bike lane on Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn. It's kind of tight. It's already an obstacle course on Fifth Avenue because it's all small businesses. I would say, one, you should have a real -- if you're going to have it on the same -- first of all, get rid of some parking and make a bike lane with a separation. Not just lines in the street. There has to be a real barrier.
>> Works well on sixth avenue in Manhattan where the bikes are on the left --
J.P. PATAFIO: Ira, our chief scheduler. We yell at him all the time at meetings. He's a good guy. I would say either separate avenues but if they're going to be there, you have to have a

design that there's clearly some type of barrier, some type of space. I know sometimes space is a premium. But that's what I would say.
KEISHA FARRELL: I agree.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: As a cyclist I would much prefer that as well.
J.P. PATAFIO: It's just easier.
NATHAN VASS: That's something we do in Seattle. There's landscaping between the bike lane and regular traffic or the bus lane. It's more expensive and takes up space but it saves lives. Worth the money.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: New York City riders tend to be sticklers for bus and subway etiquette. As a driver, what is a piece of advice you would give about behavior on a bus?
(Laughter).
Rider behavior.
NATHAN VASS: I'm going to answer very quickly and hand it off because I don't drive in New York. But in -- I think bus drivers, it's sort of a weird situation where bus drivers are one of the few positions that interact with working class and low income populations who have zero training in social work. And that is just a magnet for security incidents. You've got these operators who have no idea what they're looking at, no idea how to contextualize what they're seeing, or dealing with. And that is just a toxic connection. Toxic possibility there. When we look at security incidents in terms of whether they're preventible versus nonpreventible on the part of what the operator said or how the operator spoke as he or she did, there are so many situations that could have been mitigated or defused by training. It's a training issue as much as anything else.
(Laughter).

J.P. PATAFIO: I guess the first thing I would say is 99.9 percent of the people that get on the bus, passengers, are fine. A lot of the relationships between the operator and the public is really good. They get to know their passengers, and they get to know the students and the elderly, get to know the people on the route. For operators I guess one of the biggest fears is assaults. Because it takes one person to screw up your whole day. And then when you have one assault, it's like you got assaulted, and now you're hanging out in the swing room and now everybody is talking about the assault. And so I would just say to people when they're frustrated, angry, is just try to take a step back. Operators have a lot of rules and a lot of regulations that you may not know about. You may not know that we get over a thousand disciplines just in my division alone a year. Disciplines. That's not coaching. That's disciplining. We're bound by a lot of rules. We're bound by schedules. And sometimes we can't help it. The traffic is traffic. So if you're not getting to your destination on time it doesn't help to be yelling at the bus operator. I would just say try to understand it's a public space. And in many ways it's a special space. All of us depend on it to get to where we have to go. We got to all of us have to take care of it.
>> It's 8. Wrap up.
CHRIS VAN EYKEN: I'm being told to wrap up. I'll ask one more quick question. If you were to talk to someone that's going to start driving a bus for the first time tomorrow what's one piece of advice you would give?

NATHAN VASS: I was told that I would hate it. That my physical and mental health would deteriorate immediately. That I was going to gain x number of pounds and become miserable. If you have a suspicion that this might be something that you would really love, you might be right. And you got to trust that. When people give advice, they're usually actually giving advice to themselves. You're a little different than whoever it is. They've got something to share that's valuable but you also have something that's different. Maybe a lot of good time.
J.P. PATAFIO: That's good advice. I would also just -- we try to tell our new students when they come in, one, you have to try to take your time. You have to just -- you get paid -- luckily we're in a good union. We get paid. Take your time. You have to take your time out on the road. The job for a lot of people, it takes a certain amount of -- you have to kind of get marinated. You become an operator, you don't really understand the complexities and the stresses. You have to really give yourself that time to learn, and then you begin to appreciate the job. Of course, if you have a problem, see a union and we'll take care.
KEISHA FARRELL: I tell my operators don't take it so personally. Just don't take it personally. I told you I cried a lot. And then I had to remember it really wasn't about me. It's important for operators to understand that. Because you do meet people on the bus during different stages of the day and of their life. Things are going on. They may not be directing that at you. You're just the object of their frustration at that point in time. So it's a tall order but don't take it so personally. Give them a smile. I have operators who pray with their passengers before they take off on their trip. They do know their patrons pretty well. Forming that relationship with them. Don't take it so personally. That's it.
DAWN DISTLER: I guess if you're thinking about being a bus operator, you have to ask yourself a couple of questions. The first one is do you like people? Because if you don't, please save us all a lot of time, including you.
(Laughter).
Save us all a lot of time. If you don't like people, go be a scheduler.
(Laughter).
The other question I would have you ask is if you have a family, talk to your family because you need to remember that your family is taking this job too. You are going to miss Billy's baseball game, or Dottie's soft ball game. You're going to miss things. You're going to miss that birthday party or something like that once in a while.
Bus operators have, like, the craziest worst schedules I think of just about anybody. I think it's worst schedules than cops or firemen or anything like that. Because you do come to the -- especially when you're starting out. I would say 95 percent of transit systems out there are seniority run. That's the way it is. When you first get in there you're going to work some crappy hours. You're going to come to work, just like Keisha said, at four o'clock in the morning and you're not going to go home -- well, I couldn't say you're not going to go home -- you're not going to be finished with your day working until four or five o'clock in the afternoon. That's a reality. You're going to work weekends. And you're going to work holidays and nights. So if you want to be a bus operator you have to think of all those things.
There is a reason why -- it is a job where you can make a living. It is a job that you can support your family. But until you get up in the ranks, you're going to work in some crazy hours. That part of it is so stressful. And it really wears on a family if you have a family and you're used to

being home. And then just like I think you said, if you're already in it, don't take it personally. At all. It's not personal. What you have to remember is a bus operator, you may be the only nice, friendly face that that person sees all day long. And if that person cusses you out, or calls you out your name, or -- you know what? It's really not personal. They're not directing that at you. They're probably directing that at whoever stole from them, or beat the crap out of them or whatever it might be that they went through that day, or if you're in New York everybody rides the bus, not like Ohio where you try to push people to ride the bus. Everybody here does. Might be the guy who lost a bunch of money in the stock market. It could be anything. You might be the only friendly face the person sees that day. Don't take it personal. I tell our bus operators when they first come in, there's only really a couple of things that you have to do to have a decent day really. That's be safe and be nice. And if you can be safe and be nice, you might have a rough day now and then but it goes pretty good. Like I said it was the best job I ever had.

CHRIS VAN EYKEN: Thank you all so much.

(Applause).