CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH

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COVID-19'S IMPACT ON NEBRASKA RURAL TRANSIT SERVICE

The COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on our society in numerous ways, including, the ways in which public services are provided. Rural transit services are no exception.

Nebraska rural and tribal transit agencies provide transportation services to those in rural areas who need to access health care, shopping, education, employment, and other essential activities.

In order to systematically understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted rural transit services in Nebraska, two online surveys of transit agency managers were conducted. The survey instruments asked transit agency managers about the current status of services, changes in their operations and services due to COVID-19, top concerns, and other topics.

The surveys were almost identical and administered in May and July of 2020. This allows for some comparisons between the two time periods.

TIME PERIOD COMPARISON OF SERVICES PROVIDED

- Almost three-quarters of transit agencies reported reduced, limited, or suspended services by May.
- Over one-quarter reported further reduced or limited services by July.

The first survey asked agencies to compare the services provided in May with the services provided in February. The second survey asked agencies to compare the services provided in July with the services provided in May.

	From February to May (n=46)	From May to July (n=36)
Provide normal services	12 (26.1%)	26 (72.2%)
Reduced or limited services	30 (65.2%)	9 (25.0%)
Suspended all the services	4 (8.7%)	1 (2.8%)

The table below lists the status in both time periods of transit agencies that completed both surveys.

Provider	Comparing February to May	Comparing May to July
City of McCook Transit	Normal services	Normal services
CRANE Public Transit	Normal services	Normal services
Hitch & Hay Public Transit	Normal services	Normal services
Perkins County Public Transit	Normal services	Normal services
Tri Valley Public Transportation	Normal services	Normal services
Avera St. Anthony's Hospital	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Butler County Transit Service	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Central City Mini Bus	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
City of Neligh Dial-A-Ride Public Transit	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
City of Schuyler Handi Bus	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
City of Tecumseh/Johnson County Public Transit	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Crawford Public Transportation	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Richardson County Transit System	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Tri-City Roadrunner	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Valley County Transit System	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Lancaster County Public Rural Transit	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Garden County Public Transportation	Reduced or limited services	Normal services
Good Samaritan Society-Albion Public Transit	Reduced or limited services	Reduced or limited services
City of Sidney Transportation System	Reduced or limited services	Reduced or limited services
Nance Trans	Reduced or limited services	Reduced or limited services
Oakland Transportation System	Reduced or limited services	Reduced or limited services
Fillmore County Rural Transit Service	Reduced or limited services	Reduced or limited services
Blue Rivers Transportation System	Reduced or limited services	Reduced or limited services
Sheridan County Public Transportation System	Suspended all the services	Suspended all the services

ESSENTIAL SERVICES PROVIDED

- The majority of transit agencies provided medical, grocery, and work trips, with slightly more doing so in July.
- About one-fourth of transit agencies were delivering groceries, supplies, and medicine by May, and most continued into July.

The first survey asked agencies to compare the essential services provided in May with essential services provided in February. Around one-fourth of agencies delivered groceries, supplies, and medicine.

	From February to May (n=39)	From May to July (n=36)
Medical trips	33 (84.6%)	34 (94.4%)
Grocery trips	22 (56.4%)	32 (88.9%)
Work trips	18 (46.2%)	25 (69.4%)
Delivering groceries	13 (33.3%)	12 (33.3%)
Delivering supplies	10 (25.6%)	8 (22.2%)
Delivering medicine	9 (23.1%)	6 (16.7%)

CHANGES TO SERVICES AND OPERATIONS

- More than one-half of transit agencies reported reduced or limited available drivers by May. About one-fifth of transit agencies reported reduced or limited available drivers by July; while almost the same percent reported an increase in available drivers.
- More than one-half of transit agencies reported no changes to their services areas and business days and hours by May; and a vast majority reported no additional changes to their services areas, business days, and business hours by July.

On the first survey, agencies were able to indicate no changes; reduced or limited; or not applicable. More than one-half of the agencies reported available drivers and out-of-town trip service was reduced or limited. Over one-half of the agencies reported no changes to their service areas, business days, and business hours; while about one-third reported a reduction in service areas; one-fourth reported a reduction in business hours; and one-eighth reported a reduction in business days. One-third of the agencies reported a reduction in fares for trips.

On the second survey, agencies had one additional option and were able to indicate no changes; reduced or limited; increased or expanded; or not applicable. The vast majority of agencies reported no change in services and operations. About one-fifth reported a reduction in available drivers while about the same percent reported an increase in available drivers. About one-fifth reported a reduction in fares for trips while about one-tenth reported an increase in fares for trips. Out-of-town trips had the biggest variety in responses. About one-third said there was no change in out-of-town trip service; the same amount said it had increased or expanded it; and over one-tenth said it had reduced or limited it.

	From Pre-COVID-19 to May (n=39)	
	No Change	**Reduced or Limited**
Out of town trip service	11 (28.2%)	21 (53.8%)
Fixed route service	3 (7.7%)	8 (20.5%)
Fares for trips	20 (51.3%)	13 (33.3%)
Service areas	23 (59.0%)	12 (30.8%)
Business days	29 (74.4%)	5 (12.8%)
Business hours	24 (61.5%)	10 (25.6%)
Available drivers	11 (28.2%)	24 (61.5%)

	From May to July (n=36)		
	No Change	**Reduced or Limited**	**Increased or Expanded**
Out of town trip service	13 (38.2%)	4 (11.8%)	12 (35.3%)
Fixed route service	2 (5.9%)	1 (2.9%)	4 (11.8%)
Fares for trips	23 (67.6%)	7 (20.6%)	4 (11.8%)
Service areas	27 (76.5%)	2 (5.6%)	3 (8.8%)
Business days	30 (88.2%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (11.8%)
Business hours	26 (76.5%)	2 (5.9%)	6 (17.6%)
Available drivers	19 (55.9%)	7 (20.6%)	8 (23.5%)

TOP CONCERNS WITH RESPECT TO COVID-19

- The top three concerns of transit agencies, in both May and July, were duration of outbreak, workforce safety, and financial impact on operations.

One question on both surveys asked agencies to identify their top three concerns with respect to COVID-19, from a list of 11 items. For both surveys, agencies identified duration of outbreak/quarantine efforts, workforce safety, and financial impact on operations and/or liquidity and capital as their top three concerns.

	May (n=39)	July (n=36)
Duration of outbreak/quarantine efforts	28 (71.8%)	26 (72.2%)
Workforce safety	26 (66.7%)	23 (63.9%)
Financial impact on operations and/or liquidity and capital	21 (53.8%)	12 (33.3%)
Lower productivity	10 (25.6%)	8 (22.2%)
Decreasing consumer confidence/spending	9 (23.1%)	9 (25.0%)
Rehiring, retaining, or replacing workforce after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak ends	5 (12.8%)	5 (13.9%)
Global recession	4 (10.3%)	5 (13.9%)
Domestic supply chain disruptions	3 (7.7%)	5 (13.9%)
Workforce reduction	3 (7.7%)	4 (11.1%)
Going out of business	2 (5.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Other (Rider Safety)	1 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)

HEALTH AND SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

- From one-half to almost all transit agencies implemented a wide range of health and safety precautions by May. The most common precautions are sanitizing vehicles; providing sanitizer, face masks, and gloves to drivers; and limiting the number of passengers on a vehicle.
- Most precautions were implemented by a larger percent of transit agencies by July. The largest increases were in providing face masks for passengers and limiting the number of passengers on a vehicle.

Both surveys gave agencies the same list of 15 health and safety precautions and asked them to identify which they have implemented as a result of COVID-19. For both, more than one-half of agencies had implemented most of the health and safety precautions listed and, for most of the precautions, the percent of agencies implementing the precaution increased between May and July. The percent decreased in three measures: ask health-related questions to all passengers; developed a formal pandemic or safety plan; and check temperature of drivers.

	May (n=39)	July (n=36)
We sanitize bus/vehicles/vans in between trips and at the end of day	35 (89.7%)	34 (94.4%)
We provide hand sanitizer or disinfecting wipes for drivers	35 (89.7%)	34 (94.4%)
We provide face masks for drivers	33 (84.6%)	34 (94.4%)
We provide disposable gloves for drivers	33 (84.6%)	31 (86.1%)
We limit the number of passengers on a bus/van in order to provide social distancing between passengers	30 (76.9%)	32 (88.9%)
We require drivers to wear face masks while on the bus/van	29 (74.4%)	27 (75.0%)
We take actions to distance passengers from drivers (e.g. Block off the front row seats)	28 (71.8%)	28 (77.8%)
We provide hand sanitizer or disinfecting wipes for passengers	26 (66.7%)	28 (77.8%)
We provide drivers with option to drive or be off	25 (64.1%)	23 (63.9%)
We ask health-related questions to all passengers before they get on boarding	24 (61.5%)	18 (50.0%)
We have developed a formal pandemic or safety plan(s)	23 (59.0%)	14 (38.9%)
We provide face masks for passengers	22 (56.4%)	25 (69.4%)
We require all passengers to wear face masks while on the bus/van	20 (51.3%)	18 (50.0%)
We check temperature of our drivers before they report to work	19 (48.7%)	10 (27.8%)
We check temperature of all passengers before they get on boarding	5 (12.8%)	3 (8.3%)

COMMUNICATION WITH PASSENGERS

- In May, the majority of agencies reported using agency social media as the most common way agencies communicate information about changes to services to passengers.
- In July, the majority reported using posts at/near bus stops, closely followed by agency social media.

Both surveys asked how agencies communicate information about changes to services to passengers. The first survey listed seven communication channels, with the option of selecting and describing additional channels. Social media was reported as the most frequently used communication channel, followed by websites, phone calls, and local newspapers.

The second survey listed ten communication channels. This list included two additional channels identified by agencies in the first survey (phone calls and signage on all buses). Posts at or near bus stops was reported as the most popular communication channel, followed by social media, local newspapers, websites, and local radio.

	May (n=39)	July (n=36)
Agency social media	23 (59.0%)	19 (52.8%)
Agency websites	16 (41.0%)	12 (33.3%)
Phone calls	9 (23.1%)	4 (11.1%)
Local newspapers	8 (20.5%)	13 (36.1%)
Local radio	5 (12.8%)	9 (25.0%)
Email	4 (10.3%)	3 (8.3%)
Posts at/near bus stops	4 (10.3%)	21 (58.3%)
Passenger newsletter	2 (5.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Local TV	1 (2.6%)	2 (5.6%)
Signage on all buses	1 (2.6%)	4 (11.1%)

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

- More than one-half of agencies had issues obtaining disinfecting wipes, in both May and July.
- About one-fourth of agencies had issues obtaining hand sanitizer, facemasks, and thermometers in May; the percent having issues obtaining these items decreased in July.

Both surveys asked agencies whether they had any issue acquiring personal protective equipment. The first survey listed five items, with an option to list additional items. The second survey listed the same five items, plus gloves, and also included an option to list additional items.

In the first survey, more than one-half of the agencies had issues obtaining disinfecting wipes. About one-fourth of agencies had issues getting hand sanitizer, facemasks, and thermometers. A small percent had issues acquiring gowns and gloves.

The second survey shows similar patterns. More than one-half had issues acquiring disinfecting wipes. A small percent had issues acquiring thermometers, hand sanitizer, facemask, gloves, and disinfecting spray.

Comparing the two surveys, in July, agencies continued to have issues obtaining disinfecting wipes but had fewer issues obtaining other previously hard-to-acquire items such hand sanitizer.

	May (n=39)	July (n=36)
Disinfecting wipes	22 (56.4%)	19 (52.8%)
Hand sanitizer	11 (28.2%)	4 (11.1%)
Facemasks	11 (28.2%)	3 (8.3%)
Thermometer	9 (23.1%)	5 (13.9%)
Gowns	3 (7.7%)	2 (5.6%)
Gloves	1 (2.6%)	2 (5.6%)
Disinfecting Spray	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.6%)

RESUMING SERVICES

- In May, over 60% of agencies predicted they would return to normal services in, at most, a few months. Almost 40% had no prediction.
- In July, there was less certainty with less than 50% predicting a return to normal services in, at most a few months. About 50% had no prediction.

For both surveys agencies were asked, based on their best knowledge, how soon they will begin to provide the same level of services as prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Six options were provided, ranging from in a few weeks to a year, including a not sure option. In both surveys, the not sure option was selected more than any other option. That uncertainty grew over time, with over one-third on the first survey and increasing to almost one-half on the second survey. There was also a thin line of optimism growing over time, with one-sixth in May predicting a return in a few weeks and one-fourth in July predicting a return in a few weeks.

	May (n=38)	July (n=32)
In a few weeks	6 (15.8%)	8 (25.0%)
In a month	9 (23.7%)	3 (9.4%)
In a few months	8 (21.1%)	4 (12.5%)
In six months	1 (2.6%)	2 (6.3%)
In a year	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Not sure	14 (36.8%)	15 (46.9%)

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- In May, the CDC website, local public health officials, and local public health websites were the most popular sources for updated information, each selected by over 80% of the agencies.
- In July, local public health officials, the NDOT Transit Section website, and the Nebraska Transit website were the most popular sources for updated information, each selected by over 75% of the agencies.

The first survey asked agencies where they receive up to date information regarding COVID-19. A list of 12 option was provided, including a write-in option. Agencies could select multiple sources. The CDC website was selected by the vast majority of agencies, closely followed by local public health department officials, and local public health department websites. Selected by over one-half of the agencies were the NDOT Transit Section website, Nebraska Association of Transportation Providers, local public health department social media, and the FTA website. Less than 30% selected social media from NDOT, CDC, and FTA. Write-in sources selected by a few agencies were the Nebraska Health and Human Services website and social media; and the Nebraska Transit website.

The second survey also asked where agencies receive up to date information regarding COVID-19. The same list of 12 options was provided, plus three additional options identified in the first survey. The agencies could select multiple sources. Local public health officials was selected by the vast majority of agencies, closely followed by the NDOT Transit Section website, Nebraska Transit website, and the CDC website. Over one-half selected local public health department websites, Nebraska DHHS website, FTA website, and NATP as sources.

Over time the use of local public health department website as a source of COVID-19 information decreased while the use of NDOT Transit Section website increased. It is notable that reliance on social media from NDOT and CDC increased.

	May (n=39)	July (n=36)
CDC website	35 (89.7%)	27 (75.0%)
Local public health department officials	34 (87.2%)	31 (86.1%)
Local public health department website	32 (82.1%)	23 (63.9%)
NDOT Transit Section website	27 (69.2%)	28 (77.8%)
Nebraska Association of Transportation Providers	26 (66.7%)	18 (50.0%)
Local public health department social media	22 (56.4%)	20 (55.6%)
FTA website	21 (53.8%)	20 (55.6%)
NDOT social media	11 (28.2%)	14 (38.9%)
CDC social media	10 (25.6%)	17 (47.2%)
FTA social media	4 (10.3%)	7 (19.4%)
Nebraska DHHS website	N/A	21 (58.3%)
Nebraska DHHS social media	N/A	9 (25.0%)
Nebraska Transit	N/A	28 (77.8%)
Other resources	4 (10.3%)	1 (2.8%)
Other transit agencies	2 (5.1%)	6 (16.7%)

BUDGET IMPACT

- Of agencies that cost share, over one-half are not sure if the pandemic will impact their budgets.
- Of agencies that cost-share, in May, about 10% of agencies predicted the pandemic will impact their budgets; by July, almost 20% predicted it would have an impact.

Many transit agencies cost share with a local government agency or hospital. About two-thirds of agencies responding to the surveys do cost share. For both surveys, about one-third of the agencies who cost share reported they are not sure if budgets will be impacted by COVID-19. In May, only about 10% of agencies that cost share think their budget will be impacted; but in July this increased to almost 17%. There was an almost equal reversal of this trend of agencies who think their budget will not be impacted, from almost 18% to around 11%.

	May (n=39)	July (n=36)
Yes	4 (10.3%)	6 (16.7%)
No	7 (17.9%)	4 (11.1%)
Not Sure	14 (35.9%)	11 (30.6%)
Do not cost share with another agency	14 (35.9%)	13 (36.1%)

- Over one-half of agencies expected to receive funding from the CARES Act and are confident they know how these funds can be used. However, 30-40% reported they are not sure how these funds can be used.
- Some agencies planned to expand services using CARES Act Funding.

Both surveys asked a series of three questions related to CARES Act funding. For both surveys, over one-half of agencies reported they expect to receive funding for transit services from the CARES Act and they are confidence they know how these funds can be used. In May, about one-fourth of the agencies do not expect to receive funding from the CARES Act; that decreased to about one-fifth in July. In May, about 30% of agencies reported they are not confident or are not sure how these funds can be used. This increased to over 40% in July.

One question asked about expanding services as a result of CARES Act funding. A few agencies reported they did expect to expand services. On the first survey, expansion plans included delivering groceries, expanding options, and meal delivery to satellite sites. On the second survey, expansion plans included delivering groceries, purchasing new buses, expanding their service area, getting new riders, offering later hours during work week, and adding service hours on weekend.

	May (n=39)			July (n=36)		
	Yes	No	Not sure	Yes	No	Not sure
Expect to receive funding from CARES Act	21 (53.8%)	7 (17.9%)	11 (28.2%)	25 (69.4%)	3(8.3%)	7 (19.4%)
Feel confident about how funds can be used	25 (69.4%)	2 (5.6%)	9 (25.0%)	19 (52.8%)	2 (5.6%)	13 (36.1%)
Expect to expand service using CARES Act funding	3 (7.9%)	22 (57.9%)	13 (34.2%)	8 (22.2%)	13 (36.1%)	12 (33.3%)

METHODOLOGY

The first survey was conducted between May 28 and June 11, 2020. A link to an online survey was sent to 74 Nebraska transit service providers through the Nebraska Rural Transit Listserv. This includes 59 rural providers, seven urban providers, and eight intercity bus providers. The data analysis of the first survey is based on either 46 responses, for the first two questions, or 39 responses, for the remaining questions, unless otherwise noted.

The second survey was conducted between July 7 and July 30, 2020. A link to an online survey was sent to the same 74 Nebraska transit service providers as the first survey. The data analysis of the second survey is based on 36 responses, unless otherwise noted.

It is important to note that 24 providers participated in both the first and second survey. Demographic questions were not included in the second survey. Over 90% of the responses, for both surveys, were rural transit providers.

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The Center for Public Affairs Research is a research and community outreach unit in the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Since 1963, CPAR has engaged Nebraska with community-informed public affairs research. Today, CPAR is using new mediums to collect and disseminate public affairs data to facilitate an evidence based approach to governance in Nebraska. Ongoing projects, include, governing.unomaha.edu, policy analyses for the Planning Committee of the Nebraska State Legislature, designation as the lead agency of the Nebraska State Data Network by the United States Census Bureau, and the Nebraska Rural Transit Project with the Nebraska Department of Transportation.