



Good Transit Service Requires Well Paid Union Workers

For generations, Bus Operator jobs were a pathway into the middle class. However, in the last two decades, starting wages have fallen seriously behind the cost of living in metropolitan areas, especially coastal cities.

This injustice, which has been bubbling up since even before the COVID-19 pandemic, intertwines itself with a host of other [unsatisfactory working conditions](#) for transit workers, such as safety issues and unsustainable schedules, and a make-or-break fiscal crisis moment for many transit systems across the country. The result has been a historic, and in many cases dire, volume of vacancies for frontline transit operation jobs, especially for Bus Operators. One [recent study](#) described the breadth of the vacancy problem as follows:

More than nine in ten respondents reported shortages and/or difficulties hiring, among U.S. agencies in four surveys conducted in late 2021 or into 2022 (Wasserman et al., 2023; Dickens, 2022; Swiftly, 2023; and Foursquare Integrated Transportation Planning and EBP, 2022). In a survey by the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies, 70 percent of respondents had “great difficulty” filling open positions (Wasserman et al., 2023). Three in ten respondents to Swiftly’s survey disclosed severe understaffing, with at least one third of positions vacant, and 83 percent expected shortages to continue for at least a year (Swiftly, 2023).

This frontline workforce crisis translates into less-frequent, less-reliable service for riders and, in some cases, to devastating service cuts purporting to “rightsize” transit system operations. It adds fuel to the fire of the transit “doom loop,” where as service is less frequent, less reliable, or cut altogether, more and more riders abandon the system, which in turn destabilizes and starves transit service even more.

Given this state of affairs, we took a look at how starting wages for Bus Operators compare to the Area Median Income in 30 cities. Area Median Income is a measurement that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) uses to define different tiers of affordability in housing construction. Households earning less than 80 percent of the AMI are considered low-income households by HUD. Because there is no standardized way of measuring a “living wage” across the country, we use the Area Median Income as a reasonable stand-in.



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Our findings show a troubling reality: Everywhere in our country, new Bus Operators are paid below living wages. Only 1 of the 30 cities studied pays Bus Operators a starting wage at 80% of AMI or above: Cleveland, Ohio. Only eight cities paid over 70% of AMI, and 13 cities paid 60-70% of AMI. We found six cities paid 50-60% of AMI, and two cities paid under 50% of AMI: Miami, FL, and Raleigh, NC.

This is a conservative estimate, and the reality is probably even worse—we are using AMI for a household of 1, so this doesn't take into account the many, many families with children living on a one-person salary; it also assumes a 40-hour work week, which we know is not always the reality in many places.

Additionally, Bus Operators are on track for progressive wage increases after meeting certain numbers of years on the job. Depending on the agency, it typically takes three-six years for operators to transition from starting wage to top wage. However, even when looking at the top of the wage scale, we found that only six cities surpass 100% of AMI, seven cities fall between 90%-100% of AMI, twelve cities fall between 80-90% of AMI, and five cities pay a top wage that is only between 70-80% of AMI.

Although we understand the federal government cannot mandate that agencies raise wages, we also know that the Biden administration is one of the most “pro-labor” in decades and is pushing a “good jobs” agenda. As part of this, we think it is critical that Congress, the Biden administration, and our state governments do everything in their power to make sure operators are paid a living wage and ensure that local transit agencies can sustain their critical workforce.





Cities in Order of Starting Wages as Percentage of Area Median Income (AMI)

Here, we provide tables showing the 30 cities examined in order of starting wages as a % of AMI, using three tiers: Higher-Road, Middle-Road, and Low Road. We show the hourly starting wages, the annual starting wages, and in the last column those wages as a % of AMI. To provide a benchmark, we also show the dollar amounts in annual wages needed to achieve 80% of AMI per city (in other words - the federal standard below which you are considered “low income”.) These tables provide a perspective on which cities are doing better and worse in paying living wages to new Bus Operators.

Higher-Road Cities

City	Agency	Starting Wage (Hourly)	Starting Wage (Annual)	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	Annual Wage as % of AMI
Cleveland	Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA)	\$25.96	\$53,996.80	\$52,640	82.06%
Chicago	Chicago Transit Authority (CTA)	\$29.65	\$61,672.00	\$61,800	79.83%
New Orleans	New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA)	\$20.59	\$42,827.20	\$45,950	74.56%
Omaha	Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority of Omaha	\$24.70	\$51,376.00	\$56,400	72.87%
Memphis	Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA)	\$19.79	\$41,163.20	\$45,400	72.53%
Charlotte	Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS)	\$24.23	\$50,398.40	\$55,850	72.19%
Houston	Houston Metro	\$22.58	\$46,966.40	\$52,200	71.98%
Las Vegas	RTC Southern Nevada	\$21.00	\$43,680.00	\$48,550	71.98%
Nashville	Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority (WeGo Public Transit)	\$23.79	\$49,483.20	\$55,900	70.82%



Cities in Order of Starting Wages as Percentage of Area Median Income (AMI)

Middle-Road Cities

City	Agency	Starting Wage (Hourly)	Starting Wage (Annual)	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	Annual Wage as % of AMI
Minneapolis	Metro Transit	\$27.59	\$57,387.20	\$66,300	69.25%
Albuquerque	ABQ Ride	\$18.27	\$38,001.60	\$44,750	67.94%
Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT)	\$22.82	\$47,465.60	\$56,250	67.51%
Salt Lake City	Utah Transit Authority (UTA)	\$24.03	\$49,982.40	\$59,400	67.32%
Phoenix	Valley Metro	\$20.60	\$42,848.00	\$52,400	65.42%
Baltimore	Maryland Transit Administration (MTA)	\$25.95	\$53,976.00	\$66,300	65.13%
Philadelphia	Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)	\$24.44	\$50,835.20	\$62,500	65.07%
San Francisco	San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA)	\$31.04	\$64,558.00	\$80,700	64.00%
Detroit	SMART	\$19.00	\$39,520.00	\$50,160	63.03%
Tucson	SunTran	\$17.00	\$35,360.00	\$45,500	62.17%
Denver	Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD)	\$25.96	\$53,996.80	\$69,520	62.14%
Bakersfield	Kern Regional Transit	\$17.00	\$35,360.00	\$46,200	61.23%
Boston	Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)	\$30.25	\$62,920.00	\$83,120	60.56%



Cities in Order of Starting Wages as Percentage of Area Median Income (AMI)

Low-Road Cities

City	Agency	Starting Wage (Hourly)	Starting Wage (Annual)	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	Annual Wage as % of AMI
Atlanta	Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)	\$20.00	\$41,600.00	\$57,200	58.18%
Los Angeles	LA Metro	\$24.59	\$51,147.20	\$70,650	57.92%
Durham	GoTriangle (GoDurham)	\$19.65	\$40,872.00	\$56,650	57.72%
Washington, D.C.	Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA)	\$29.49	\$61,339.20	\$85,200	57.60%
NYC	Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)	\$26.19	\$54,475.20	\$79,120	55.08%
Oakland	AC Transit	\$25.82	\$53,705.60	\$78,550	54.70%
Miami	County of Miami Dade (Transportation & Public Works)	\$17.31	\$36,004.80	\$57,800	49.83%
Raleigh	GoTriangle (GoRaleigh)	\$19.00	\$39,520.00	\$63,500	49.79%





Cities in Order of Affordability Using Area Median Income (AMI)

Here, we provide tables showing the 30 cities examined in order of affordability, using four tiers: Most Expensive, Higher Mid-Range, Lower Mid-Range, and Affordable. We show the starting wages, top wages (where available), and then the number of years it takes to reach top wages (where available). We also show the starting wages as a % of AMI and the top wages as a % of AMI. To provide a benchmark, we also show the dollar amounts in annual wages needed to achieve 80% of AMI per city (in other words - the federal standard below which you are considered “low income.”) These tables provide a perspective on the state of Bus Operator wages by how affordable it is for these folks to live where they work.

Most Expensive Cities

City	Starting Wage (Hourly)	Starting Wage (Annual)	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	Starting Wage as a % of AMI	Years to Top Wage (if available)	Top Wage Hourly (if available)	Top Wage Annual (if available)	Top Wage as a % of AMI
Washington, D.C.	\$29.49	\$61,339.20	\$85,200	57.60%	6 years	\$42.14	\$87,651	82.30%
Boston	\$30.25	\$62,920.00	\$83,120	60.56%	4 years	\$43.22	\$89,897	86.52%
San Francisco	\$31.04	\$64,558.00	\$80,700	64.00%	N/A	\$44.34	\$92,227	91.43%
NYC	\$26.19	\$54,475.20	\$79,120	55.08%	6 years	\$38.54	\$80,163	81.05%
Oakland	\$25.82	\$53,705.60	\$78,550	54.70%	4 years	\$36.89	\$76,731	78.15%



Cities in Order of Affordability Using Area Median Income (AMI)

Higher Mid-Range Cities

City	Starting Wage (Hourly)	Starting Wage (Annual)	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	Starting Wage as a % of AMI	Years to Top Wage (if available)	Top Wage Hourly (if available)	Top Wage Annual (if available)	Top Wage as a % of AMI
Los Angeles	\$24.59	\$51,147.20	\$70,650	57.92%	5+ Years	\$36.36	\$75,628	85.64%
Denver	\$25.96	\$53,996.80	\$69,520	62.14%	4 years, 6 mo.	\$32.88	\$68,390	78.70%
Minneapolis	\$27.59	\$57,387.20	\$66,300	69.25%	4 years	\$34.50	\$71,760	86.59%
Baltimore	\$25.95	\$53,976.00	\$66,300	65.13%	5 years	\$37.08	\$77,126	93.06%
Raleigh	\$19.00	\$39,520.00	\$63,500	49.79%	3 years	\$28.40	\$59,072	74.42%
Philadelphia	\$24.44	\$50,835.20	\$62,500	65.07%	4 years	\$34.91	\$72,612	92.94%
Chicago	\$29.65	\$61,672.00	\$61,800	79.83%	2 years, 9 mo.	\$39.53	\$82,222	106.44%





Cities in Order of Affordability Using Area Median Income (AMI)

Lower Mid-Range Cities

City	Starting Wage (Hourly)	Starting Wage (Annual)	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	Starting Wage as a % of AMI	Years to Top Wage (if available)	Top Wage Hourly (if available)	Top Wage Annual (if available)	Top Wage as a % of AMI
Salt Lake City	\$24.03	\$49,982.40	\$59,400	67.32%	5 years	\$28.05	\$58,344	78.58%
Miami	\$17.31	\$36,004.80	\$57,800	49.83%	N/A	\$28.03	\$58,302	80.70%
Atlanta	\$20.00	\$41,600.00	\$57,200	58.18%	4 years	\$27.34	\$56,867	79.53%
Durham	\$19.65	\$40,872.00	\$56,650	57.72%	4 years	\$29.93	\$62,254	87.91%
Omaha	\$24.70	\$51,376.00	\$56,400	72.87%	N/A	\$29.05	\$60,424	85.71%
Pittsburgh	\$22.82	\$47,465.60	\$56,250	67.51%	4 years	\$36.15	\$75,192	106.94%
Nashville	\$23.79	\$49,483.20	\$55,900	70.82%	3 years	\$27.59	\$57,387	82.13%
Charlotte	\$24.23	\$50,398.40	\$55,850	72.19%	5 years	\$32.94	\$68,515	98.14%
Cleveland	\$25.96	\$53,996.80	\$52,640	82.06%	5 years	\$34.61	\$71,988	109.41%
Phoenix	\$20.60	\$42,848.00	\$52,400	65.42%	5 years	\$30.98	\$64,438	98.38%
Houston	\$22.58	\$46,966.40	\$52,200	71.98%	N/A	\$26.92	\$55,993	85.81%





Cities in Order of Affordability Using Area Median Income (AMI)

Affordable Cities

City	Starting Wage (Hourly)	Starting Wage (Annual)	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	Annual Wage as % of AMI	Years to Top Wage (if available)	Top Wage Hourly (if available)	Top Wage Annual (if available)	Top Wage as a % of AMI
Detroit	\$19.00	\$39,520.00	\$50,160	63.03%	4 years	\$25.00	\$52,000	82.93%
Las Vegas	\$21.00	\$43,680.00	\$48,550	71.98%	N/A	\$31.11	\$64,708	106.63%
Bakersfield, CA	\$17.00	\$35,360.00	\$46,200	61.23%	N/A	\$29.22	\$60,777	105.24%
New Orleans	\$20.59	\$42,827.20	\$45,950	74.56%	3 years	\$30.15	\$62,712	109.18%
Tucson	\$17.00	\$35,360.00	\$45,500	62.17%	N/A	\$25.93	\$53,934	94.83%
Memphis	\$19.79	\$41,163.20	\$45,400	72.53%	3 years	\$25.97	\$54,017	95.19%
Albuquerque	\$18.27	\$38,001.60	\$44,750	67.94%	N/A	\$22.52	\$46,841	83.74%





Cities in Order of Top Wages as a Percentage of Area Median Income (AMI)

City	Agency	Top Wage (hourly)	Top Wage (annual)	Years to Reach Top Wage	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	% of AMI for 1 Person
Cleveland	Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority (RTA)	\$34.61	\$71,988	5 years	\$52,640	109.41%
New Orleans	New Orleans Regional Transit Authority (RTA)	\$30.15	\$62,712	3 years	\$45,950	109.18%
Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) - formerly Port Authority of Allegheny County	\$36.15	\$75,192	4 years	\$56,250	106.94%
Las Vegas	RTC Southern Nevada	\$31.11	\$64,708	N/A	\$48,550	106.63%
Chicago	Chicago Transit Authority (CTA)	\$39.53	\$82,222	2 years, 9 mo.	\$61,800	106.44%
Bakersfield, CA	Kern Regional Transit	\$29.22	\$60,777	N/A	\$46,200	105.24%
Phoenix	Valley Metro	\$30.98	\$64,438	5 years	\$52,400	98.38%
Charlotte	Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS)	\$32.94	\$68,515	5 years	\$55,850	98.14%
Memphis	Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA)	\$25.97	\$54,017	3 years	\$45,400	95.19%
Tucson	SunTran	\$25.93	\$53,934	N/A	\$45,500	94.83%
Baltimore	Maryland Transit Administration	\$37.08	\$77,126	5 years	\$66,300	93.06%
Philadelphia	Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)	\$34.91	\$72,612	4 years	\$62,500	92.94%
San Francisco	San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA)	\$44.34	\$92,227	N/A	\$80,700	91.43%
Durham	GoTriangle (GoDurham)	\$29.93	\$62,254	4 years	\$56,650	87.91%
Minneapolis	Metro Transit	\$34.50	\$71,760	4 years	\$66,300	86.59%
Houston	Houston Metro	\$26.92	\$55,993	N/A	\$52,200	85.81%



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City	Agency	Top Wage (hourly)	Top Wage (annual)	Years to Reach Top Wage	80% of Area Median Income for 1-person HH (Federal Low Income Threshold)	% of AMI for 1 Person
Omaha	Regional Metropolitan Transit Authority of Omaha	\$29.05	\$60,424	N/A	\$56,400	85.71%
Boston	Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA)	\$43.22	\$89,897	4 years	\$83,120	86.52%
LA	Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (LA Metro)	\$36.36	\$75,628	5+ Years	\$70,650	85.64%
Albuquerque	ABQ Ride	\$22.52	\$46,841	N/A	\$44,750	83.74%
Detroit	Detroit Dept of Transportation ; SMART	\$25.00	\$52,000	4 years	\$50,160	82.93%
Washington, D.C.	Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA)	\$42.14	\$87,651	6 years	\$85,200	82.30%
Nashville	Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority (WeGo Public Transit)	\$27.59	\$57,387	3 years	\$55,900	82.13%
NYC	Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)	\$38.54	\$80,163	6 years	\$79,120	81.05%
Miami	County of Miami Dade (Transportation & Public Works)	\$28.03	\$58,302	N/A	\$57,800	80.70%
Atlanta	Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA)	\$27.34	\$56,867.20	4 years	\$57,200	79.53%
Denver	Denver Regional Transportation District (RTD)	\$32.88	\$68,390	4 years, 6 mo.	\$69,520	78.70%
Salt Lake City	Utah Transit Authority (UTA)	\$28.05	\$58,344	5 years	\$59,400	78.58%
Oakland	Alameda Contra Costa Transit District (AC Transit)	\$36.89	\$76,731	4 years	\$78,550	78.15%
Raleigh	GoTriangle (GoRaleigh)	\$28.40	\$59,072	3 years	\$63,500	74.42%

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