

CASE STUDY: BILINGUAL TRANSIT WORKFORCE INITIATIVES

Introduction

The United States is a multilingual country. [According to 2019-2023 5-year American Community Survey estimates](#), 22% of people in the U.S. spoke a language other than English at home, including 13.4% who spoke Spanish at home. While immigrants have historically been concentrated in urban and metropolitan areas, suburban and rural communities are home to an [increasing number of people born outside the U.S.](#) In light of many transit agencies' needs to serve linguistically diverse riders and recruit and retain workers, locations around the country have begun to offer English language pathways and to adapt recruitment and training initiatives to support bilingual workers. This Transit Workforce Center (TWC) case study explores several such initiatives.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- English language pathway programs can promote recruitment of transit workers from untapped talent pools.
- Recruiting bilingual workers can make transit locations' workforces more representative of service area demographics and enhances communication with riders.
- Agency-based English language learner recruitment initiatives involving bilingual proficiency, training, and operations continue to evolve, with innovation occurring at the local level.
- Local partners and use of both national and local financial and informational resources can provide significant, effective support in designing and delivering these varied programs.

UTA Bilingual Bridges

[Like many transit locations](#), **Utah Transit Authority (UTA)** has been affected by workforce shortages. In 2023, the agency had an urgent need to hire bus operators. UTA training staff learned of a local school district, Granite Peaks, that offered English as a second language (ESL) adult education courses and had recently received a grant to help English language learners secure employment. The agency partnered with the district to develop Bilingual Bridges, a bus operator ESL program focused on language skills directly relevant to transit.

UTA and Granite Peaks ran Bilingual Bridges as a pilot; three cohorts completed the program. The course ran for 8-12 weeks for 29 hours per week. Participants were paid to attend classes, which UTA's Director of Workforce Technical Training Stacey Palacios credited as a key factor in the program's success. The course was run by an ESL instructor, employed by Granite Peaks, and a UTA trainer. About 60% of class content was focused on English language skills, while 40% was specific to bus operations and included prep work for the commercial driver's license (CDL) permit test. Overall, the focus was on job-relevant language acquisition, including safety, customer service, and navigation. Participants who completed the program could apply to become UTA bus drivers and join the new hire program, which includes CDL training. Some participants were also hired as technicians.

UTA staff estimate that 90% of participants in Bilingual Bridges were recruited through Granite Peaks. This pipeline allowed Granite Peaks' ESL instructors to recommend existing students with sufficient levels of proficiency to join Bilingual Bridges.

Running the program was not without its challenges. Cost is always a factor when designing training programs, and UTA may seek to identify a partner organization to sustain the program with less direct administrative oversight from UTA. Not all participants had sufficient driving skills, and some were unable to obtain CDLs. In earlier cohorts, participants with lower English proficiency enrolled with mixed results; the program has recalibrated its requirements with successive cohorts. Notably, retention rates for new hires who completed the program were comparable to those of other new hires.

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Check out [Mass Transit magazine's article on the program](#).

Bilingual Bridges produced several major benefits. Creating a new recruitment pipeline advanced the agency's goal of addressing the workforce shortage: Granite Peaks served as a recruitment partner, and past program participants could refer others. The program also advanced UTA's goal of having a workforce that is representative of service area demographics, and increasing the number of bilingual bus drivers enhances the agency's ability to serve riders who primarily speak Spanish or other languages.

While this version of the program has been paused, UTA staff feel that its success can serve as a model for other agencies.

Bilingual Recruitment and Operations at HIRTA

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The poster features a photograph of a bus driver in a blue uniform. A yellow smiley face is superimposed over the driver's head. A black arrow points from the smiley face to the website URL. At the bottom, there is a QR code and a circular logo with a white bus on a green path.

Some agencies have adapted to changing demographics of their service areas by embracing bilingual recruitment, hiring, training, and operations. The **Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency (HIRTA)**, which serves seven counties in central Iowa, values community engagement and coordinates extensively with local partners. This approach extends to engagement with riders and job seekers who are learning English.

HIRTA has developed Spanish-language recruitment materials and job listings that are disseminated online, broadcast on Spanish language radio, and posted in public places that include stores serving predominantly Spanish-speaking customers. The postings are also mailed out to the local Chamber of Commerce and community organizations. Julia Castillo, HIRTA's Executive Director, says that HIRTA staff bring recruitment materials to community events just in case they encounter people who are looking for work.

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To learn more, please [visit HIRTA's website](#).

HIRTA has hired a bilingual mobility manager and a bilingual call center worker. These individuals are available to assist with job interviews, which can be conducted in Spanish if a candidate prefers. Road training can also be completed with the support of a bilingual trainer, and training videos can be closed captioned with Spanish subtitles. The mobility manager and call center worker communicate with drivers and passengers in both English and Spanish. Castillo indicated that, while workers generally acquire stronger English skills over time, conducting agency processes in a bilingual fashion is feasible, and in fact supports stronger engagement with Spanish-speaking passengers.

Bilingual Recruitment and Operations at MeVa

Merrimack Valley Transit (MeVa) serves towns and cities in northeastern Massachusetts including Lawrence and Haverhill; the region has a large Spanish-speaking population. Like HIRTA, MeVa has found that recruitment, training, and operations can be successfully conducted in a manner that enables workers who are learning English to succeed. The agency has removed stated English proficiency requirements from recruitment materials and job listings, although applicants still need to complete an application in English. Job interviews are generally conducted in English to establish an applicant's baseline proficiency, but Spanish-speaking staff are available to lead bilingual interviews. MeVa has two bilingual trainers, bilingual dispatchers, and a driver workforce half of whom are bilingual. MeVa's Director of Administration Jaymi Swarbrick indicated that having a heavily bilingual workforce creates a supportive environment for new hires who are still developing English fluency and facilitates effective communication with passengers.

Several members of MeVa's management have been bilingual, which was a factor in the agency's move to recruit more heavily from the region's Spanish-speaking population and affirm bilingualism in the workplace. The professional organization [Latinos in Transit](#) has been an important resource for MeVa's leadership. Affirming language diversity has been part of MeVa's broader efforts to attract more riders through rebranding – the agency's buses now feature the bilingual English and Spanish slogan "Let's go/¡Vamos!"

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To learn more, please [visit MeVa's website](#) and read a [Mass Transit magazine article on their rebranding efforts](#).

The WIN Partnership and Canal Alliance

Learn More

- [WIN Partnership information from CA Transit Works!](#)
- [Canal Alliance English language programs](#)
- [Canal Alliance job skills programs](#)

In a [February 2024 case study](#), TWC detailed workforce initiatives developed by the WIN Partnership in Marin County, California. WIN, a labor-management partnership formed between **Golden Gate Transit** and **ATU Local 1575**, with support from California Transit Works, sponsors operator mentorship, registered apprenticeship, and pre-apprenticeship programs.

Golden Gate Transit staff found that elements of their application process disproportionately created barriers for members of certain demographic groups. Sixty-seven percent of people who began a job application did not complete it, with the highest rates of non-completion among Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic applicants. A bus operator pre-apprenticeship program was created to reduce barriers to entry. Pre-apprentices can access wrap-around services through the Canal Alliance, a community-based organization, including English language classes. Canal Alliance also serves as a recruitment partner.

Partner Resource: National RTAP technical brief: Essential Spanish for Rural Transit

The **National Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP)**, like TWC, is a Federal Transit Administration - sponsored technical assistance center. Their resource library includes many materials designed to support rural transit operations, including a brief entitled Essential Spanish for Rural Transit. This document summarizes existing initiatives to train transit workers in basic Spanish to better communicate with riders and contains a list of common phrases in English and Spanish that were identified through a survey of transit operators. To view the brief, open the PDF under the 'media' section of the [resource listing on Essential Spanish for Rural Transit](#).

In 2020, National RTAP hosted a [webinar on Essential Spanish for Rural Transit](#).

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