



**TRANSIT'S ROLE IN SOCIETY:**  
**THE AMBASSADOR EFFECT:**  
**TURNING ANECDOTES INTO DATA**

2024 LEADERSHIP APTA RESEARCH CAPSTONE |



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# Executive Summary

In recent years increased interactions with our most vulnerable communities have challenged the notion that our transit systems are clean, safe, and secure. The Transit Ambassador Program is a strategic initiative designed to enhance the overall transit experience for passengers while addressing key objectives such as improving safety perceptions, boosting ridership, and fostering stronger community partnerships.

A 2020 TCRP industry survey asked which transit agencies experienced the following in the past year:

- Quality of life issues. 100%
- Fare evasion. 92%
- Assaults. 85%
- Homelessness/vagrancy. 85%
- Trespassing. 75%
- Human trafficking. 15%

“

The ‘public’ part of the transit agency is just that. We are woven into the fabric of every City/County that we operate in. Their problems are our problems. – RTD Debra Johnson

”

Ambassador programs have been established by transit agencies for a variety of reasons. However, many agencies lack a framework for measuring the value or results of these programs. Some are customer service focused, some are safety-security focused, some are facilities focused. As the industry grapples with the fiscal cliff, agencies will be compelled to justify their ambassador program investments. This project aims to provide recommended practices and highlight agency-specific examples of:

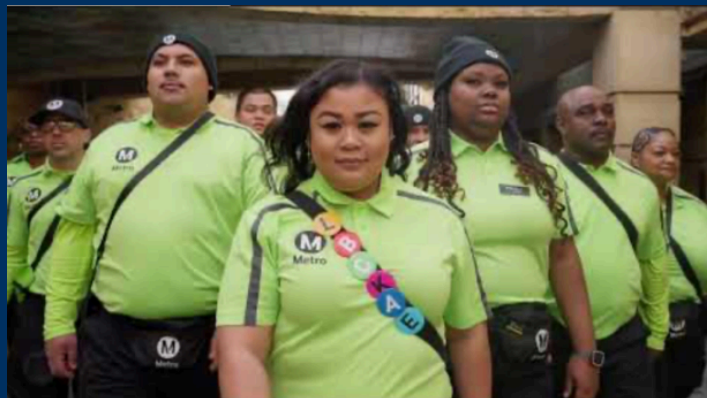
- How to structure an ambassador program
- How to measure program impact
- Ambassador program benefits
- How to communicate about an ambassador program

Is it time to tell a different story that matches our work, our efforts, and our data?

“

We’re at the point in the program where we need to think about whether we’re actually driving the change we aimed.  
– King County Metro Jeanne Suleiman

”



# Ambassador Program Structure

Structuring an ambassador program for a transit agency involves specific considerations to effectively engage and inform the community about public transportation services, promote usage, create a safer and cleaner environment, and gather valuable feedback. This structure has many parts that are easily identifiable and can be used from the largest transit agencies to the smallest rural ones.

The first priority in structuring a transit agency's program is identifying the program's goals: what problems are attempting to be solved, or what is trying to be improved? Objectives can be tailored to a specific agency such as: improved customer sentiment, improved public perception of the system, greater perceived safety, improved cleanliness, ease of wayfinding, ADA rider assistance, promotion of new services or routes. Identifying the desired outcomes can inform where to house the program within an agency, such as within the police/security function, customer service, safety, facilities maintenance, etc. The program should have identifiable metrics that can be tracked and reported. These measures will help show the effectiveness of the program and identify weaknesses or new measurables that may be tracked.

Identifying ideal ambassadors might include daily commuters, students, senior citizens, retirees, and future safety and security professionals. These individuals should show good communications skills and be engaging with others. They should have a strong community background and have an interest in making the transit agency a better place. An ambassador should be familiar with the system and has experience riding different routes. Some agencies focus recruitment efforts on "individuals with lived experience" – i.e., people who have overcome some of the same challenges encountered by vulnerable communities on the system.

Options for staffing structure include:

**-In-house hiring:** King County Metro has used light-duty operators for certain ambassador roles, as they are already familiar with the system. Jacksonville Transportation Authority has a mix of full- and part-time in-house staff for its Community Outreach Team.

**-Contractors:** Several agencies, such as the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, use contractors. Block by Block provides staffing to communities for central business district beautification and wayfinding for visitors.

**-Partnerships with non-profit or educational organizations:** The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority partners with educational entities (practicum experience for future health professionals), government entities (Philadelphia Department of Public Health), and non-profit entities (housing advocates, human trafficking prevention).

There are many ways to recruit ambassadors through agency social media, outreach to community organizations, attending local hiring and community events, or developing relationships with schools and businesses. Law enforcement academies are good places to find individuals for an ambassador program while they are attending school. Ambassadors do not have to be full-time or in-house personnel, which opens up many different options in the hiring process.

“Engage with people but tread lightly. You're not security.”  
– TriMet Pat Williams



# Program Structure

“

The addition of friendly, helpful people was obviously one of the desired outcomes of the Transit Ambassador program. In fact some referred to this as one of the few initiatives in memory that received unanimous public approval.

– Block by Block

”



It is important to develop a clear program structure. An agency should define what the ambassadors are supposed to do based on program goals. Ambassadors need clear and concise responsibilities and the ability to measure their daily work. For example, if a program's focus is cleanliness of the transit centers or bus stop locations, ambassadors should be provided tools to photograph and document their work. If the agency uses mobile apps, allow ambassadors to report issues through the app for streamlined communication and accountability with other departments. An ambassador program that focuses on security can have different checkpoint locations for the ambassadors to visit daily (i.e., hot spots). Ambassadors should track their movements/sites visited/vehicles ridden and report back what they see and with whom they interact.

Training might be one of the most important steps in the development of your ambassador program. The ambassador must be familiar with the agency and whom it serves. They will need to know the system, key messages, and safety protocols including evacuations, along with specific training tailored to the program's expectations. Many of the interviewed agencies have implemented safety training such as the following:

- Customer service/Customer experience
- Conflict de-escalation/Situational awareness
- Emergency preparedness
- Public safety awareness
- Disability awareness
- CPR/First Aid/Narcan
- Trauma-informed response/Mental Health

“

One concern about ambassador programs is that the line between ambassadors and police is not clear.

– AlphaVu Scott Wilkinson

”

Use tools and analytics to track ambassador activities, social media reach, feedback collected, and event participation. Regularly gather feedback from ambassadors to understand their experiences and identify areas for improvement. Continuously refine the program based on the performance data and feedback to ensure it remains effective and relevant.

# Performance Metrics

Agencies should establish and track Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to evaluate progress toward goals and objectives. These indicators can help identify trends, measure results, and prioritize efforts. When communicated properly, impactful data can also improve public perception and increase confidence in the service. Transit agencies can use KPIs to make the case to sustain or increase funding for an ambassador program.

It is important for agencies to use data strategically. Agencies collect and have access to a lot of data yet may not be synthesizing or analyzing it in a useful way. For some agencies, data collection in and of itself poses a challenge. For others, it may be a data quality concern. Some agencies may collect data at irregular intervals or struggle to develop meaningful methods to utilize the data. Smaller transit agencies in particular may be challenged to allocate staffing and business tools to data collection/analysis.

For ambassador programs to be successfully viewed by the public as having value, measurements should include both customer and non-customer focused KPIs. The tables below outline examples used in the industry.

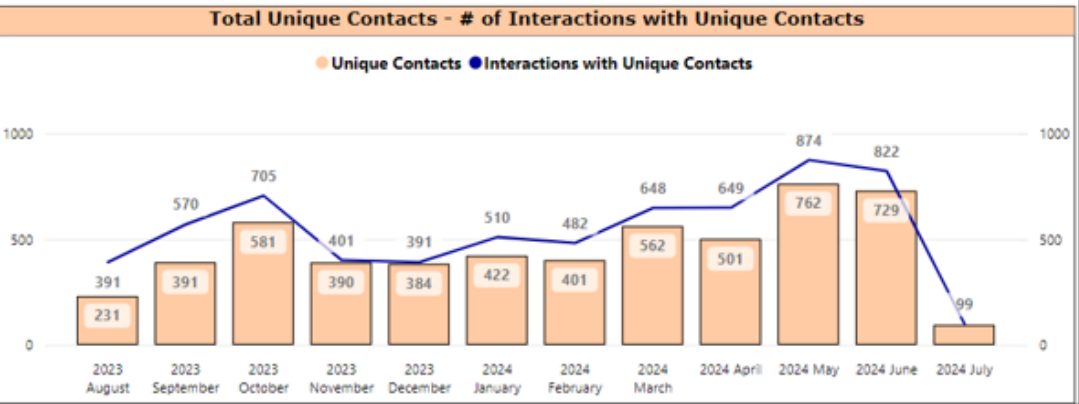
## Customer-Focused

| Difficulty | KPI                | Why it Matters                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | How to Measure                                                                      | Challenges                                                                                                                           |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Low        | Calls for Service  | Can the agency show a decreasing share of calls for service involving law enforcement? Can the agency show a decrease in overall calls for service? This would indicate successful de-escalation of interactions with the public. | Dispatch, computer aided dispatch (CAD), in-house police data                       | If calls for service are not coded by cause/type, or if the calls go to a third-party dispatcher, data may not be readily available. |
| Medium     | Customer Sentiment | Can the agency show an improvement in customer perception- in confidence, feelings of safety/ security, satisfaction with facilities/cleanliness? Are wayfinding and ADA-oriented customer service improved?                      | Surveys (either performed in-house or contracted); complaint/ customer service data | Can be time- and resource-intensive. May only collect strong negative/strong positive sentiment.                                     |
| High       | Delays             | Can the agency show a reduction in operational delays attributable to passenger issues? Can the agency show better overall on-time performance?                                                                                   | Dispatch data                                                                       | If an agency doesn't currently code delays by cause/type, this could be a heavier lift.                                              |

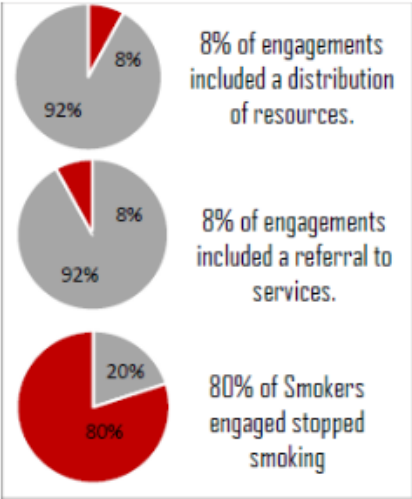
# Performance Metrics

## Non-Customer Focused

| Difficulty | KPI                            | Why it Matters                                                                                                                  | How to Measure                                                      | Challenges                                                                            |
|------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Low        | Contacts                       | Oversight/accountability for ambassadors                                                                                        | Ambassador activity/daily reports; supervisor reports               | Focuses on quantity, not quality; may overcount repeat contacts with same individuals |
| Medium     | Referrals for service          | Understand needs people are presenting with; identify opportunities for partnerships                                            | Ambassador activity/daily reports; supervisor reports               | Need a well-structured program with clearly delineated referral options               |
| Medium     | Employee Sentiment             | Improved morale contributes to recruitment, retention, quality customer service                                                 | Employee survey; HR data (including exit interview); union feedback | May be difficult to disaggregate contributing factors to sentiment                    |
| High       | Vulnerable population presence | Can the presence of vulnerable populations on the system who are dwelling, loitering, continuously riding be shown to decrease? | Point-in-time surveys (e.g., year to year)                          | Resource intensive; may not be comprehensive indicator, more a gauge of hot spots     |



King County Metro – sample tracking of total contacts v. unique contacts over time.



SEPTA – Sample program KPIs.

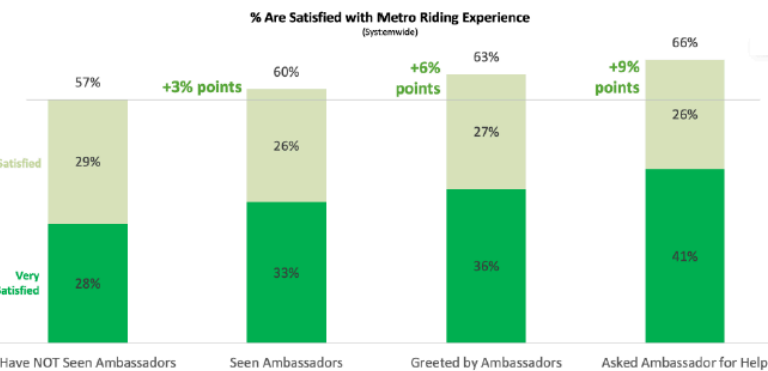
| Activity Type         |                           | Services Offered            |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Assist Passenger      | Non-Destination Passenger | Customer Service & Outreach |
| Customer Service      | Social Services           | Emergency Provisions        |
| Disruptive Passenger  | Suicidal                  | Food/Water                  |
| Intoxicated Passenger | Trespasser                | Housing                     |
| Indecent Exposure     | Wayfinding                | Shelter                     |
| Medical               | Welfare Check             | Social Services Referral    |
|                       |                           | Transportation              |

TriMet – Categories of engagements tracked by ambassadors.

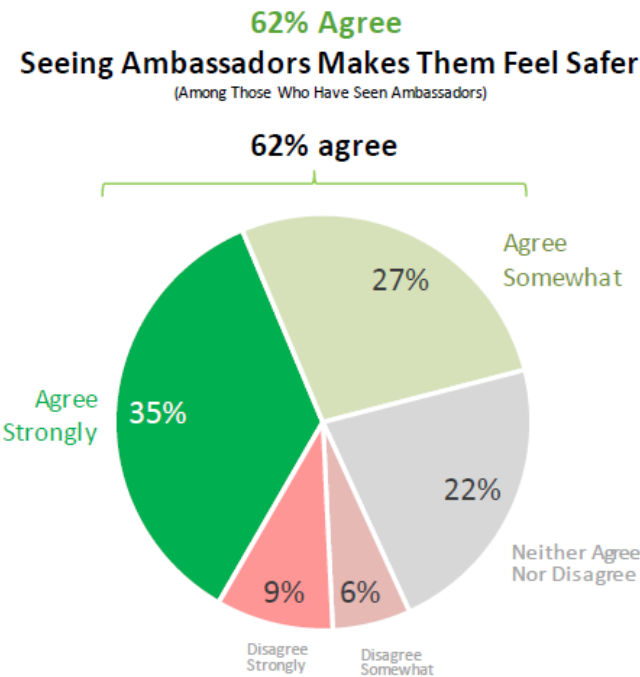
# Benefits

According to a 2023 YouGov poll of 6,776 U.S. adults found that two in five (39%) say city transportation is very or somewhat dangerous, with that belief being highest among people who never use public transportation (54%). It is clear that the perception of safety is often a result of vulnerable populations' visibility within transit. These groups have often been ignored or "not seen." Now ambassador programs ensure that these populations are not only seen but offered support and connected with resources.

Several agency CEOs interviewed indicated that ambassador programs are positively impacting ridership. Most agencies are seeing ridership increases year-over-year post pandemic. At this time it is unclear as to a true correlation between ambassador programs and trackable KPIs and how they impact ridership. One could assume that for each effort made through ambassador visibility, there would be positive agency perception, positive customer experience sentiment, and therefore positive ridership impacts. As CapMetro's CEO Dottie Watkins put it: "What if instead of focusing on ridership, our industry focused on the quality of access we provide for living your best life?"

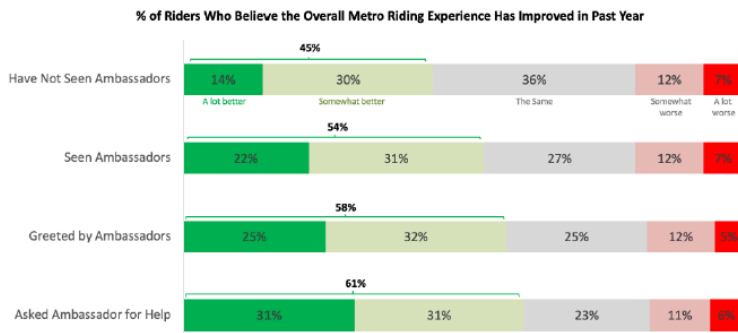


Riders who have had **more interaction** with Ambassadors have **higher satisfaction levels**



LA Metro - Customer feedback on ambassadors

Riders who have seen or interacted with Ambassadors are **more likely** to feel their Metro riding experience has improved.



“Employee feedback started with skepticism: ‘We need cops, not granola bars!’ But has since become: ‘Those people with the backpacks are great!’  
– TriMet Pat Williams”

**SCOPE Outreach Teams (7 teams)**  
**Narcan Doses administered in 2023**

| Quarter | Doses |
|---------|-------|
| Q1      | 37    |
| Q2      | 22    |
| Q3      | 89    |
| Q4      | 86    |
| Total   | 234   |

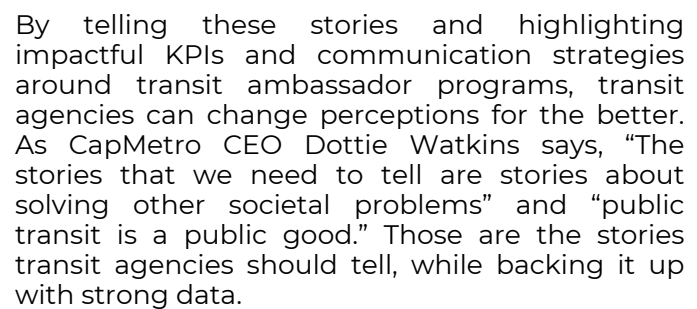
SEPTA – Example of lives saved by ambassadors.

“Ridership is an imperfect measure of public transit's importance to its communities and our nation. - APTA Beyond Ridership Report”

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# Communication Strategies

As an ambassador program grows, the agency should convene regular meetings to discuss progress, share experiences, and plan upcoming activities. An agency should recognize and celebrate ambassador success by highlighting ambassador contributions through social media shout-outs, newsletters, and at public events. There could be a monthly spotlight of outstanding ambassadors featured on the agency's website. More formally, there could be an annual awards ceremony or Board meeting item to honor top contributors.

It is important for agencies to build relationships with local media and provide reporters access to facilitate coverage of positive stories such as ambassador programs. Likewise, the government relations or community affairs staff should be equipped with "useful nuggets" of information to share with elected officials and community leaders.



Pictured Left to Right: Operations Manager Taylor Swanson, Sam (a bus patron), and David, our Flex Ops Supervisor. Last month we met Sam during a biohazard clean up request. Sam has down syndrome and is working with the Seven Counties-School to Work program. This young man shared that he rides the bus and waits at this stop daily. An associate with Seven Counties that was assisting him mentioned that she sees us regularly and appreciates our efforts, letting us know that our work does not go unnoticed. Sam was pleased with our efforts to make his daily commute more accessible, safe and clean.

*Block By Block – sample ambassador accolade.*

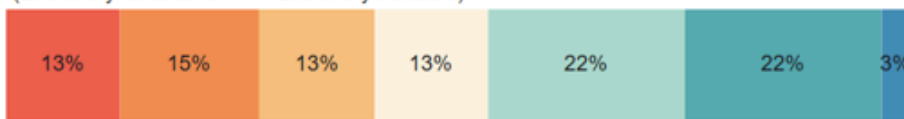


SEPTA – Excerpt from ambassador program annual report

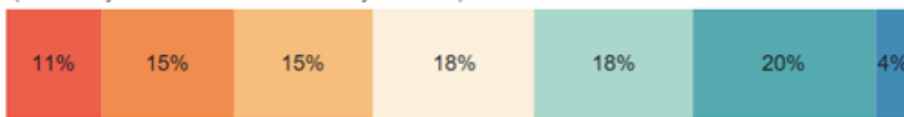
# Communication Strategies

Both internal and external communication must be appropriately tailored to the audience, succinct, and digestible. Charts and tables should not be overly complex or difficult to interpret. Effective employee communications focus on what's in it for the frontline worker. Interviewees reported using a mixture of written and verbal communication, including town hall-style meetings at work locations and job safety briefings to spread the word about ambassador program initiatives. Sharing program data can help demonstrate to employees that the agency is working to address systemic challenges its employees face in the field.

How would you rate the MBTA overall?  
(Extremely dissatisfied ---> Extremely satisfied)



How satisfied are you with the MBTA's communication overall?  
(Extremely dissatisfied ---> Extremely satisfied)



How would you rate your most recent trip?  
(Extremely dissatisfied ---> Extremely satisfied)



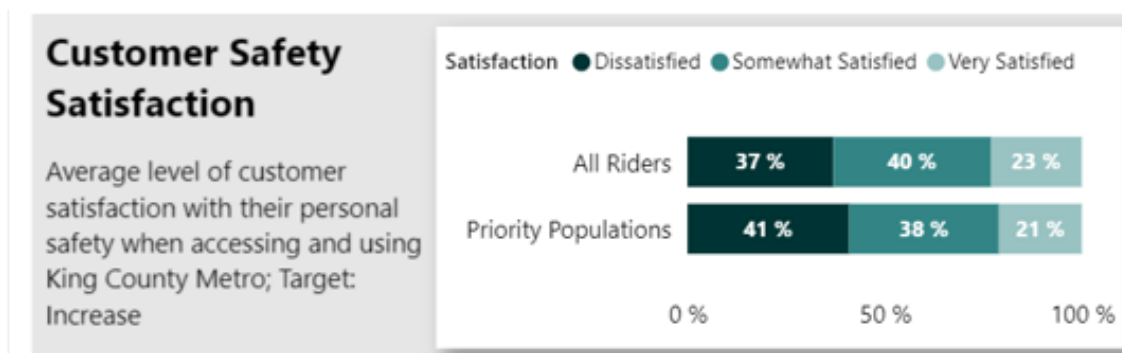
The MBTA provides reliable public transportation services?  
(Strongly disagree ---> Strongly agree)



“ Agencies must be very clear of the ambassador role in order to manage expectations.  
– AlphaVu Scott Wilkinson ”

“ We do a lot of great work, we just gotta publicize it.  
– SEPTA Leslie Richards ”

MBTA – Public dashboard showing customer satisfaction



King County Metro – Public dashboard showing customer satisfaction

# Resources

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# Research Excerpts

## 2020 - TCRP - Transit Security Preparedness

Staffing decisions that can be difficult, since adding personnel is often the most costly operating expenditure that an agency will face.

There is little formal evaluation of transit security awareness programs. Efforts to assess whether the messages are reaching transit riders and to identify obstacles to participation have been limited.

If riders believe an agency and its employees are concerned for their welfare and are trying to meet their needs, they are more likely to respond to requests for support and cooperation. Planning and implementing public awareness activities in isolation from other agency issues and operations limits their potential to effect real change.

## 2019 - TCRP - Social & Economic Sustainability Measures

### Ways to measure KPIs

- Process** – types of policies and planning activities, such as whether the organization has a process for collecting performance data.
- Inputs** – resources invested in particular activities, such as funding levels.
- Outputs** – direct results, such as customer contacts.
- Outcomes** – ultimate results, such as user satisfaction.

### Keys to good KPIs

- Measure's Applicability.** How applicable is the measure to transit agency operations?
- Universal Applicability.** Is the measure expected to be universally applicable to all types and sizes of transit agencies?
- Realistic and Attainable.** Is the level of effort to collect and maintain the data to support this measure reasonable considering transit agencies resources?
- Monitoring/Implementation.** Is the measure reasonable to track over time and use as a continuous process improvement benchmark?
- Well Understood.** Is the measure understandable by transit agency stakeholders and/or by standard setting organizations?

## 2018 - TCRP - Customer-Focused Service Guarantees & Transparency Practices

- Make the system scalable.** MBTA designed its dashboard to be scalable, knowing that as additional data sets become available, they will be added without extra work to modify dashboard format/design.
- Automate data.** As much as possible, pull the data from automated data sources into a back-end system the dashboard can pull from. MBTA developed a data warehouse that enabled automation of the dashboard for most measures. Limits resources necessary to maintain dashboard and respond to requests.
- Provide context to the data.** To minimize the chance of the dashboard data being misinterpreted or misused, MBTA released a data blog on the dashboard that explains the assumptions that it makes with the data, where the data come from, & reasons a certain data source may not be as reliable as another.

## 2017 – TCRP – Addressing Difficult Customer Situations

Partnerships between organizations are a step in the right direction—75% of transit agency respondents partner with others. Partnerships between transit agencies and local law enforcement were seen to enhance customer security, increase help for those in need, and help in deescalating a given situation much more smoothly.

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Director Community Engagement

The project team is available for live presentations to executive leadership teams, industry panels and committees, and the like to advance awareness of this research and share the recommendations for actions.



THANK  
YOU

