



## MOBILITY AND PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

# Evacuation Preparedness of Public Transportation in Rural Coast Communities of the North Gulf Region

### PROJECT BACKGROUND

Forty percent of the country's transit dependent populations live in rural areas. Coastal communities along the I-10 corridor from Florida to Louisiana are predominantly rural and are under constant threat of hurricane, flood, and heavy rainfall almost every fall season. Rural areas are underserved by public transportation. School buses are widely available, easily recognizable, and often the only form of public transportation in rural areas. Public transportation can perform multiple roles in evacuation and be a successful partner in four tasks of emergency management plans: (1) mitigation, (2) preparedness, (3) response, and (4) recovery. Due to public transportation's capabilities to perform multiple tasks, it can play an important role in rural communities' mobilities in emergencies. The objective of this project was to assess the emergency preparedness of public transportation in rural coastal communities in the Northern Gulf of Mexico Coastal region. The assessment focuses on how adequately prepared, and what role public transportation and school districts could play in the event of an emergency evacuation. For more information, visit [www.evacuationandtransportation.org/](http://www.evacuationandtransportation.org/)

### WHAT WE DID

A survey of 46 public, private, and school transportation agencies was conducted within the 28-county study area in the Northern Gulf of Mexico region (NGM). 24 agencies completed the survey representing a 52% response rate. The survey focused on the following topics:

- Transit services provided in rural areas;
- Communication systems used for transit;
- Information specific to emergency events;
- Transit employee issues;
- Evacuation preparation; and
- Transit expenditures and revenue for emergency events and assessment of transit needs/coordination.

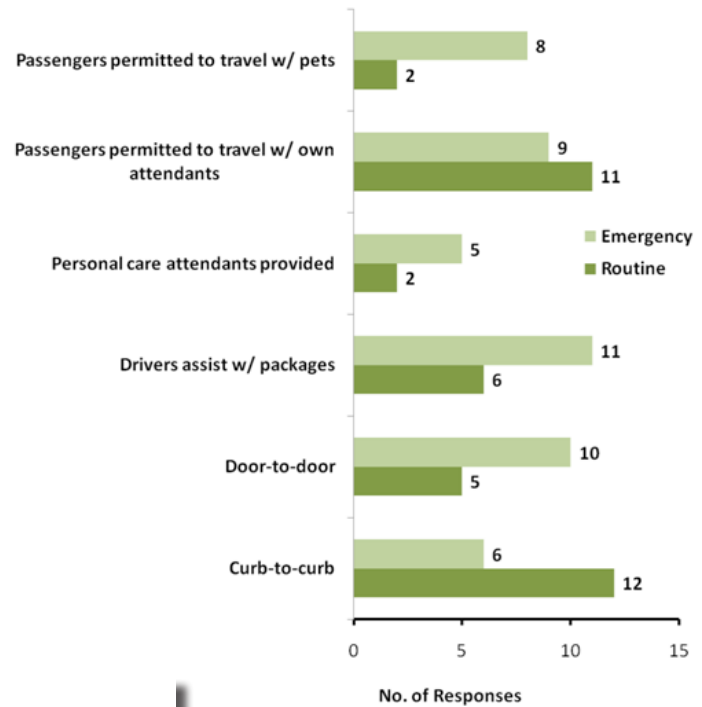
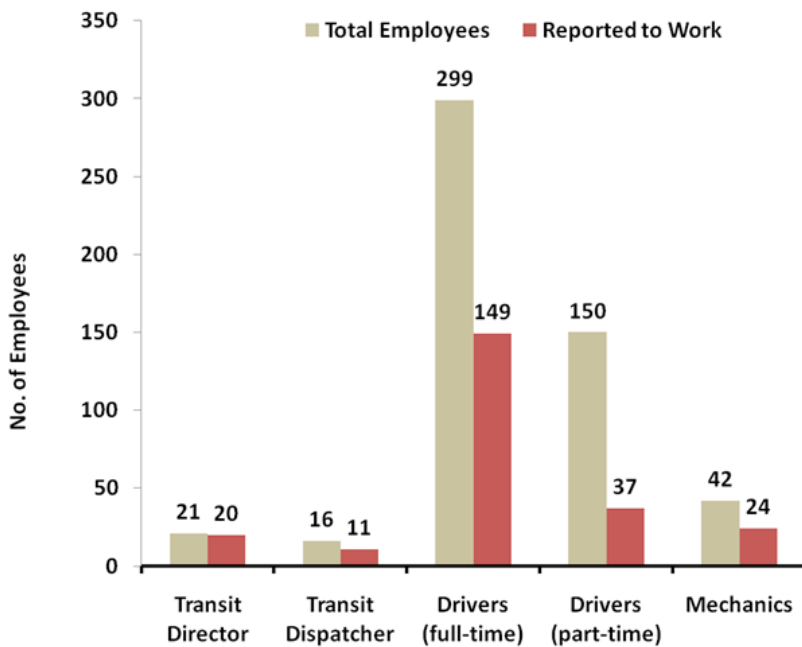
### PROJECT FINDINGS

- In an emergency event, transit agencies became more flexible in their transit delivery and provided more demand response services.
- Passenger assistance levels increased when the transit systems moved from routine operations to emergency events.
- Transit services were active in improving coordination, conducting regular mock-drills, increasing participation of people and transit, and establishing service aid agreements.
- Funding for evacuation-related operations and capital expenses for transit was the most significant and frequently cited concern related to emergency planning.

• Concern for families and personal well-being has prevented transit employees from reporting to work during an evacuation in the past.

• **SCHOOL BUSES** can be a very feasible and important mode of transit in an evacuation due to their high passenger capacities and availability in rural areas.

**Advantages:** Buses are equipped to deal with altered schedules and weather conditions, highly visible in traffic, schools act as shelters, and school resources such as nurses, drivers, mechanics, and safety officers are already available. **Disadvantages:** Adult capacity on buses is limited as compared to children, drivers have to rely on local EMAs for passenger information, buses are not equipped with air conditioning, at a greater risk of exposure to litigation, and have limited wheelchair accessible spots.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

• **Communication.** Technical issues such as sparse communication network coverage in rural areas or network break-down hinder evacuation operations. Transit agencies equipped with satellite phone technology and passenger information would disseminate information more efficiently.

• **Employee Issues.** Employee responsibilities in emergency events should be well defined in job descriptions and reinforced with necessary job training. A 'prior commitment' form could be signed by employees during the hiring process, along with notification of defined emergency assistance benefits for serving in emergency events.

• **Inadequate Finances.** In the reauthori-

zation of the SAFETEA-LU, it is suggested that Congress recognize the inadequate finance issue and authorize the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to reimburse transit evacuation expenses including operation, training, and preparation for local, state and national level emergencies.

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