

Little Rock, Arkansas transit workers laid off amidst COVID fears

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Rock Region Metro (RRM), the transit system based in Little Rock, Arkansas, has *temporarily* laid off 23 employees with no mention of compensation even as the state has moved to relax restrictions related to the spread of coronavirus. The Pulaski County transit agency announced on May 5 its suspension of five of its twenty-three bus routes while modifying a sixth.

The service cuts are reportedly due to high absenteeism, with drivers taking time off work over fears of COVID-19 infection. Meanwhile, ridership on RRM's 23 regular bus routes fell 44 percent last month from the same period in 2019. The concerns by drivers express wide distrust of bogus claims by public officials that the danger from the disease is lessening and that restrictions can be safely lifted.

With high rates of absenteeism amid concerns over high-capacity bus stops potentially leading to buses themselves becoming disease vectors, the district's spokeswoman Becca Green stated RRM "has had no drivers to operate its buses."

The cuts involve the elimination of 8 routes, subject to change, including several express routes. Three other routes will see only limited service.

The COVID-19 death toll in Arkansas now stands at 98, with 4,758 confirmed cases. All businesses other than bars began opening last week under loosened restrictions. However, a surge of new cases prompted Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson to at least temporarily delay moving into "phase two," which relaxes rules regarding social distancing and the wearing of masks.

The *temporary* layoffs involve sixteen full-time bus drivers, two part-time bus drivers, and five drivers for the agency's paratransit service, the latter being federally mandated transportation for people who have disabilities and cannot use the regular, fixed-route

buses. Many depend on public transit to replenish their food stock, work, and to reach medical appointments.

Rock Region Metro has, including the twenty-three drivers that were laid off, one hundred regular bus drivers and twenty-four paratransit drivers with total employment at the agency of two-hundred. RRM has claimed that driver and passenger safety on public transit has been an ongoing concern during the pandemic.

In eliminating routes, RRM says it is able to reallocate available drivers to high-ridership routes "that have been experiencing emergency redlining of service for the past few weeks," according to a statement issued by the agency. "Our goal here is to stabilize the service, so we're temporarily reducing it and hoping we are engaging in temporary layoffs."

The RRM website asserts, "At this time, to our knowledge, no METRO employees have had or has COVID-19. METRO remains committed to working with the community to maintain vital public transit service during the coronavirus pandemic while taking additional measures to reduce exposure risk to riders and staff members.

"We were experiencing a singular level of operator absences so that resulted in an unprecedented amount of emergency redlining service cuts for riders over the last few weeks," it continues, "we can't send out a bus because we have no one to drive it."

RRM, in announcing route reductions said it "remains committed to working with the community to maintain vital public transit service during the coronavirus pandemic while taking additional measures to reduce exposure risk to riders and staff members."

It claimed, "the dropped and modified routes will ensure a minimal level of bus service for its riders."

In late April, the transit agency began requiring all

passengers to wear masks in order to board a bus while earlier in April RRM had required passengers to board and depart from the rear door in order to help protect drivers from the disease. In March, RRM restricted ridership to ten or fewer people on a bus at any given time. No indication has been given whether this limit has been lifted or is still in force. Meanwhile, streetcar services have been suspended, categorized as “non-essential.”

The measures so far adopted by RRM have not been sufficient to convince drivers of their safety under conditions where the state is lifting whatever limited measures it had imposed to stop the spread of the virus. Drivers are in constant interaction with hundreds, if not thousands of impoverished people a day, many of whom have no access to quality health-care.

The agency, which received a \$15 million grant under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, has eliminated fares during the pandemic. The CARES money far offsets the \$5,000 RRM is losing daily due to the fare elimination.



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