

RTAP Peer Roundtable Notes

Driver Training & ELDT

05/21/2026 | 1:30-3 PM | Online

Attendees

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Aaron Forstrom | 10. Marion Henry |
| 2. Chris Hiepler | 11. Mike Ahlin |
| 3. Crystal Gauthier | 12. Pat LaCourse |
| 4. DJ LaValla | 13. Rhonda Torgersen |
| 5. Jeremy Monahan | 14. Tracy Borgschatz |
| 6. Joanne Brackey | 15. Aleda Johnson |
| 7. Jordan Smith | 16. Ted Nelson |
| 8. Kathy Grobe | 17. Mariah Kathan |
| 9. Annette Marier | 18. Jaycie Kratky |

Biggest Challenges:

CDL Testing — Pass Rates and Pre-Trip Inconsistency

- Drivers often fail the behind-the-wheel and pre-trip portions of the CDL test multiple times before passing, even after thorough in-house preparation.
- State CDL examiners are inconsistent in what they expect during pre-trip inspections — one examiner may require certain demonstrations while another considers the same action unnecessary or distracting.
- The ELDT pre-trip curriculum has not always aligned with what DMV examiners actually test, creating confusion for trainers and drivers alike.

2. CDL Knowledge/Permit Test Failures

- Some drivers struggle to pass the written permit tests (general knowledge and passenger endorsement), requiring multiple attempts.
- Minnesota and Wisconsin lowered requirements for the CDL road test, but permit test requirements were not reduced to match — creating a mismatch that trainers find frustrating.
- The \$20 re-test fee for failed permit attempts causes some candidates to ghost the agency rather than try again.
- Candidates who fail portions of the permit test on a computer-based exam are not always aware they can request a paper test instead.

3. Candidate Drop-Off and Ghosting

- A significant number of newly hired drivers who need a CDL fail to follow through on obtaining their permit after being hired — some agencies report only 10% of candidates returning after being told to get their permit.
- Drivers sometimes misunderstand that obtaining the CDL is their own responsibility and wait for the employer to initiate or deliver the test.
- Requiring a permit prior to hiring reduces drop-off but limits the applicant pool, particularly in rural areas with fewer CDL-eligible candidates.

4. Limited Time and Bandwidth for Training

- Trainers — especially those in dual roles — struggle to carve out dedicated time for structured training amid other operational responsibilities.
- Building and maintaining a solid, written training plan takes time that many smaller rural agencies do not have.
- When training duties are shared with lead drivers or mentors, it is difficult to ensure consistency in what is being taught and modeled.

5. CDL Testing Appointment Availability

- In some regions, CDL testing appointments at state DMV facilities are booked weeks or even months out, significantly delaying the point at which a new hire can get on the road.
- Agencies that operate in border communities (e.g., Minnesota/Wisconsin) face additional complications since a driver licensed in one state may need to travel long distances to test in the other.
- Cancellations can affect the agency's standing with testing facilities and ability to schedule future appointments.

6. Contractor-Managed Driver Training

- Agencies that use third-party contractors for drivers have limited ability to enforce additional or ongoing training standards beyond what the contract requires.
- Contractors may meet baseline requirements but leave gaps in areas like customer service, technology, and policy application that the agency cannot directly address.

7. Ongoing and Refresher Training Gaps

- Customer service, de-escalation, and interpersonal skills are areas where drivers frequently need more training, but dedicated resources are limited.
- Drivers transitioning to dispatch software (e.g., Ecolane) struggle with efficient scheduling, overlapping ride assignments, and knowing when and how to push back on dispatch.
- The Smith System defensive driving certification is highly regarded but expensive (\$1,700+ for recertification, \$4,000+ for initial certification), making it inaccessible for many smaller agencies.

8. ELDT Regulatory Complexity and Record-Keeping

- The ELDT federal requirements involve multiple documentation components — self-certification forms, behind-the-wheel checklists, test records, instructor qualification records, and lesson plans — and not all agencies are aware of everything they should be retaining.
- State DOT auditors may request ELDT test records during audits, particularly at agencies with third-party testers, making complete and organized records essential.
- It is not always clear which state or federal definition or regulation applies to specific scenarios, especially in multi-state operating areas.

9. Driver Conduct and Policy Enforcement

- Drivers occasionally use transit vehicles for personal purposes while on the clock — including stopping at garage sales, running home for extended periods, or picking up personal items using the vehicle lift.
- Unauthorized passengers (family members, friends, companions) riding along on shifts is a recurring challenge, with ambiguity about what is and is not acceptable.
- Non-drivers (group home staff, family members) sometimes attempt to operate lifts or assist with securement, creating safety and liability risks.
- Agencies without weekend dispatchers face greater exposure to policy violations since drivers are largely self-supervising on those days.

Solutions and Best Practices:

CDL Test Preparation

- Have drivers read the Minnesota CDL manual directly — DMV test questions come from the manual, not the ELDT curriculum materials. Paying drivers to study the manual on the clock has shown positive results.
- Conduct practice tests and review questions drivers got wrong before their permit test, rather than simply reviewing all material.

- Administer pre- and post-training assessments during ELDT to measure knowledge gains and identify gaps to focus on.
- Use open, public roads and large parking areas (such as fairgrounds) for closed-course behind-the-wheel practice, including backing maneuvers.
- Remind drivers and candidates that a paper test is available if they struggle with the computer-based permit exam.

Improving Scheduling for CDL Tests

- Book CDL test appointments as early as possible in the training process — even before the candidate is fully ready — since appointments book out weeks in advance. Cancel or push out if needed.
- Check appointment availability online on Saturday mornings, when the scheduling system resets, to find earlier slots.
- When calling testing facilities, identify your agency as a transit provider — transit drivers are typically scheduled after school bus drivers and may receive priority access.
- Establish relationships with specific examiners at your local testing facility to get more reliable scheduling and communication.
- Consider pursuing a third-party tester designation for a qualified supervisor to conduct in-house CDL testing (note: the designated tester cannot also serve as a trainer for the same drivers, due to conflict-of-interest rules).

Reducing Candidate Drop-Off

- Require candidates to obtain their CLP (learner's permit) before extending a job offer. This ensures candidates have some skin in the game and are committed before the agency invests in training.
- For agencies in rural areas with smaller applicant pools, offer to help candidates get their permit after hiring, but set a clear deadline (e.g., 60 days) for obtaining it.
- Provide candidates with a step-by-step written checklist of everything they need to do to obtain their permit and CDL, along with trainer contact information for questions along the way.
- Communicate clearly which steps are the employee's responsibility versus the employer's to prevent misunderstandings and passive waiting.

Building a Structured Training Program

- Document your agency's full driver training process in writing — from application through first solo shift — so it can be consistently communicated to every new hire.
- Use RTAP's ELDT PowerPoint materials, behind-the-wheel checklists, and self-certification forms as a foundation, supplementing with agency-specific materials as needed.

- Retain all ELDT records (test scores, checklists, lesson plans, instructor qualification documents, self-certification forms, copies of CLP and CDL) in each driver's personnel file indefinitely — state auditors may request them.
- Keep a copy of your trainer's CDL and documentation showing two or more years of experience as a driver of that vehicle class or as a BTW instructor to demonstrate instructor qualification.

Mentorship and Peer Training

- After completing ELDT and CDL testing, have new drivers ride along with experienced lead drivers to learn routes, tablet software, pre- and post-trip procedures, and agency culture before going solo.
- Carefully select mentor drivers — choose those with strong attitudes, consistent habits, and adherence to policy. Avoid pairing new drivers with those who may model shortcuts or bad habits.
- Designate lead drivers in each operating area or city as primary go-to resources for new hires, with a corresponding pay differential.

Ongoing Training

- Schedule PASS (Passenger Assistance Safety and Sensitivity) training, defensive driving, bloodborne pathogens, and first aid within the first 90 days of employment.
- The Smith System defensive driving program is highly effective and can reduce insurance premiums — agencies serving rural or tribal areas may qualify for RTAP scholarships to offset the cost. The Smith System is now exploring virtual delivery options for certified trainers to use with larger staff groups.
- Batch new-hire cohorts for group trainings (like defensive driving) when possible to maximize trainer time and foster peer learning.
- Contact RTAP to arrange co-training or trainer support visits at your agency.

Driver Conduct and Policy

- Include clear policy language stating that agency vehicles may not be used for personal purposes while on the clock, covering scenarios like stopping at home, running errands, picking up personal items, and using the lift for non-transit purposes.
- Require driver approval from a supervisor before allowing any non-passenger (including family members) to ride along. Make clear this is at management discretion and not a standing permission.
- Use live GPS/map tracking to monitor vehicle location during shifts, particularly in areas or on days without direct dispatcher oversight.

- Train drivers explicitly that lift operation is a driver-only function — group home staff, family members, and other bystanders must not operate the lift or handle securement. Drivers should always verify and re-check all securement, even if another person has assisted.

Ask a Peer: Questions and Answers

Q: Has anyone had drivers stop at garage sales, run personal errands, or go home for extended periods while on the clock? What did you do?

A: Yes, multiple agencies have encountered this. One agency used live GPS map tracking to identify a driver who was repeatedly stopping at home during shifts without clocking out. The issue was addressed formally through a written reprimand and updated policy language. The behavior stopped after the conversation. Agencies recommended having clear written policy stating vehicles cannot be used for personal purposes while on shift, and that any deviation requires supervisor approval and clocking out.

Q: What about drivers stopping at garage sales or free-item tables while on the clock, or using the vehicle lift to load personal items onto the bus?

A: This would fall under misuse of agency vehicles for personal purposes — a policy violation in most agencies. Using the lift to load personal property would compound the issue significantly. One agency noted their policy explicitly covers this scenario. A write-up or disciplinary action would be appropriate, particularly if the driver had already been told this was not permitted.

Q: Has anyone had a driver allow a family member, friend, or significant other to ride along for an extended portion of their shift?

A: Several agencies shared experiences. One agency had a driver whose wife occasionally sat on the bus during downtime between trips in a rural area with long waits — the trainer noted it was low-risk given the context but acknowledged it could become a distraction. Another agency had drivers ask in advance to bring grandchildren for a short portion of a quiet shift and approved it. The consensus was that asking for prior approval is the key distinction. Allowing someone to ride along for the majority of a shift without permission is a policy violation. Mariah recommended adding language to driver policy requiring supervisor approval for any non-passenger riders.

Q: Has anyone had non-drivers (such as group home staff or family members) attempt to operate the lift or assist with securement?

A: Yes, this has come up at several agencies, particularly during group home pickups where facility staff want to help. Agencies responded by clarifying that lift operation is strictly a driver function. Staff or companions may assist inside the vehicle (e.g., positioning a passenger), but the driver must operate the lift and verify all securement points — even if someone else has already attempted to buckle or secure. Drivers are instructed to go back and check every tie-down and belt regardless of outside assistance.

Next Peer Roundtable: June 18, 2026 - Succession Planning