

RTAP Peer Roundtable Notes

Stress & Time Management

08/20/2026 | 1:30-3 PM | Online

Attendees

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Gale Schulz | 8. Jeremy Monahan |
| 2. DJ LaValla | 9. Allison Karau |
| 3. Reid Grant | 10. Kayla Sullivan |
| 4. Joanne Brackey | 11. Jaycie Kratky |
| 5. Aaron Forstrom | |
| 6. Patti Flannigan | |
| 7. Crystal Gauthier | |

Ice Breaker Question: What is your biggest interruption during the workday?

- Email notifications/pings pulling attention away from focused work
- An open-door office policy that invites frequent staff drop-ins and questions
- Side conversations from staff that start as work-related and drift off-topic
- Small "fires" or urgent issues that pop up mid-task, especially while entering ride/billing information
- Wearing multiple roles/hats, so one question can turn into a larger conversation
- Ongoing employee concerns and interoffice chatter
- Dual-use office space (e.g., staff coming in for counts, tablets, equipment drop-off/pick-up)
- Meetings that could have been an email, and repetitive requests for the same clarification

Individual Stress: Awareness

Q: How do you know when you are stressed?

- Physical cues: sighing out loud, blowing air into cheeks, teeth grinding, muscle tension
- Feeling tightness or a "weight" in the chest, and general body tension
- A visual cue — an overflowing to-do list or a desk covered in sticky notes
- An emotional response, or a sense of reaching a "breaking point" that signals the need to step back
- A "freezing point" tasks feel enormous and there is a temporary urge to avoid doing anything

Individual Stress: Coping Strategies

Q: How do you handle it when you are stressed?

- Step away from the stressor and take a walk, even briefly around the building
- Use a commute as a decompression period — music, cruise control, no obligation to think about work
- Practice intentional breathing; notice when breaths become short and consciously slow down
- Engage in a hands-on hobby to reset (examples shared: gardening/yard work, glass art, building large Lego sets)
- Remind yourself that a stressful moment is not the whole day

Staying Positive During a Stressful Shift

Q: What helps you stay positive during a stressful work day or shift?

- Reconnect with the "why" and "who" — remembering the riders served and the impact of the work
- Envision the end point of a task or project rather than the whole workload at once
- Break large, overwhelming projects into smaller tasks and focus on finishing one at a time
- Reflect on leadership training and try to stay grounded rather than getting pulled into others' conflict

Staff Stress: Frontline vs. Office

Q: What stressors do frontline staff (drivers/dispatchers) experience differently than office/admin staff?

- Dispatchers often absorb complaints and immediate, real-time pressure minute to minute
- Conflict between staff members can escalate quickly and pull in supervisors to mediate
- Drivers may vent to dispatch in person or over the radio, creating tension that spreads to the whole office and affects customer service in the moment

Q: What can operators and dispatchers do to support each other in stressful situations?

- Be kind and think before speaking
- Remember everyone is on the same team; focus on solving the problem rather than assigning blame

- Hold regular team meetings that include a team-building or morale element, not just information-sharing
- Open recurring staff meetings by having each person share a personal or professional "win" from the week to build connection between roles (e.g., dispatch and drivers)

Q: What shared stressors affect all staff (frontline and office)?

- Being short-staffed — admin staff work to backfill while remaining staff stretch to cover routes
- Uneven attendance patterns among a subset of staff can create resentment and added stress for everyone
- For supervisors, chronic short-staffing becomes an additional layer of stress and unresolved team issues
- Increasing the frequency of one-on-one check-ins with staff was raised as a needed improvement

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)

Q: Does your agency have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and how is it used?

- Several agencies confirmed they have an EAP, though coverage and provider can vary by insurance plan
- One agency's EAP is funded through workers' compensation insurance rather than health insurance, meaning it is available to all staff regardless of health-plan enrollment
- EAP has been used to refer staff for legal assistance, mental health support, and support after a difficult incident (e.g., a threatening rider interaction)

Q: How often is the EAP resource shared with staff?

- Posted in staff areas, but visibility fades if the posting never changes
- Rotating or refreshing EAP posters/flyers periodically helps them catch staff attention again
- Featured in an agency newsletter article, though readership isn't guaranteed

Time Management

Q: What does time management mean to you, and what does a successful day look like?

- Identifying priorities regularly and understanding what is time-critical versus what can wait
- Keeping a running list and crossing off completed items for a visible sense of progress
- Tackling the most important/largest items first, then smaller items as time allows

Q: What tools or resources do you use for time management?

- Digital calendars (e.g., Outlook) to track daily meetings and commitments
- Paper lists and using a driving schedule/route sheet as informal scratch paper for notes while on the road
- A physical whiteboard to list and cross off tasks
- Delegating tasks to free up time and build redundancy/cross-training on the team

Q: How do you manage staff time when the agency is understaffed?

- Prioritize what must get done, especially driving/route coverage
- When managers or leads need to step in and drive, assign themselves easier or more familiar routes and reserve complex routes (e.g., wheelchair-accessible) for more experienced drivers

Advice for New Employees

Q: What advice would you give yourself or a new employee in your role?

- Build redundancy — make sure more than one person knows how to do each task so delegation is possible
- Create clear, written processes and procedures, and apply them consistently across staff
- Consider a companion cheat-sheet or checklist so staff can self-serve answers to common questions
- Write training documentation in plain, simple language (aim roughly for an early-grade reading level) so it is accessible to anyone regardless of transit experience
- Involve multiple staff members and leadership in developing training materials so the material has broader buy-in and support
- Keep trying even when early attempts (e.g., a training manual) are set aside or not well received

Ask a Peer — Q&A, Resources & Strategies

The second portion of the roundtable was an open "Ask a Peer" discussion. Three main topics emerged: use of AI tools, dispatch software, and policies for veteran rides.

Topic A: AI Tools

Q: What AI tools or assistants are participants using, and for what purposes?

- ChatGPT (or similar AI chat tools) used to stay organized, prioritize multiple ongoing projects, and capture ideas on the go from a phone or computer
- Microsoft Copilot / Microsoft 365 tools (e.g., Microsoft "Notes"/OneNote-style pages and Microsoft Planner) used to take shareable meeting notes and track tasks; notes can

be shared with staff similarly to a Word or Excel file within Teams, and accessed via a mobile app

- Google's AI assistant (Gemini) used for quick research questions, brainstorming, and even non-work tasks (e.g., paint color suggestions, recipe ideas, identifying a plant or insect from a photo)
- One participant is exploring using an AI assistant to help rewrite/rebuild an internal training manual, with plans to fact-check and reword any inaccurate content

Q: What cautions or tips did peers share about using AI tools?

- Always fact-check and reread AI-generated content before using it — it can quietly change details or reverse the intended meaning of a policy statement
- Be specific and correct the tool when it gets something wrong; it will typically acknowledge the error and revise its answer
- Avoid sharing sensitive personal information (e.g., banking details, home address) with AI chat tools
- AI is a helpful starting point for drafting documents and policy language, but human review remains essential

Topic B: Dispatch Software

Q: Is dedicated dispatch software worthwhile for a small transit system (fewer than 10–11 vehicles)?

- Multiple peers agreed dispatch software is valuable even for small fleets; relying on spreadsheets or a notebook was described as outdated for a system of that size
- Peers with similarly small fleets confirmed they use dedicated dispatch software successfully

Q: What software do peers currently use, and what has the experience been?

- One legacy platform (formerly "RouteMatch," since rebranded after being acquired by TripSpark) was cited as a source of frustration — participants reported paying for optimization features that were never fully delivered, and service/updates declined after ownership changes
- "Spare" was cited as a newer, AI-driven dispatch platform that several peers use and recommend. Reported benefits included automatic route/bus optimization, a rider-facing app, an after-hours AI voice agent, and roughly 30% of trips now self-scheduled by customers
- Reported impact of switching to Spare: high on-time performance (cited around 98%), fewer "where's my bus?" calls to dispatch, and reduced staff hours (able to shift from 12-hour/split shifts to standard 8-hour shifts) without reducing dispatch staff headcount

Q: Where can agencies get help selecting or right-sizing dispatch software?

- MnDOT has a contact and consultant resources available to help agencies evaluate and right-size technology purchases so they don't over- or under-buy for their agency's needs
- A technology fact sheet/resource comparing available options was referenced as helpful for agencies exploring the technology landscape
- MnDOT Transit Technology Grants were mentioned as currently open, as a possible funding source for new dispatch software

Topic C: Veteran Ride Policies

Q: Do other agencies offer free or discounted rides for veterans, and how do they structure it?

- Some agencies offer free rides to veterans on fixed routes only (not demand-response), typically requiring the rider to show a veteran ID/card
- Some agencies extend free rides to any recognized veteran across ride types, sometimes at driver discretion when a rider is a known veteran
- One agency does not offer direct free rides; instead, they refer veterans to their County Veteran Service Office (VSO), which determines eligibility for transportation assistance. Approved trips are tracked and invoiced to the county quarterly as a voucher (no cash exchanged with the driver). Costs are ultimately covered by veteran service organizations (e.g., DAV, American Legion, VFW) that reimburse the county
- Another agency purchases ride punch cards on behalf of eligible riders (including veterans) as needed, so the transit provider is still compensated per ride

Q: Do agencies get reimbursed for veteran rides, or absorb the cost?

- Some agencies absorb the cost as a rider benefit with council/board approval (no free or discounted rides in general, veteran rides included)
- Agencies using the VSO-voucher model do receive reimbursement, billed quarterly to the county, which is in turn reimbursed by veteran service organizations
- One participant noted this is an open policy question at their agency: leadership is weighing whether to end blanket free rides for veterans and instead ask county VSOs or veteran service organizations to cover the cost

Q: What concerns did peers raise about verifying veteran or disability status?

- Requiring drivers to verify a rider's disability status (e.g., "service-connected disability") was raised as a potential privacy/compliance concern and a source of conflict between drivers and riders

- Multiple peers said they intentionally avoid having drivers verify or question a rider's eligibility status (comparable to not questioning service animals) to prevent uncomfortable or contentious interactions
- Where eligibility verification is needed, agencies generally prefer to have that determination made by an outside party (e.g., the County VSO) rather than by frontline drivers

Q: How can an agency estimate the potential cost/impact of a veteran ride policy?

- Track rides using a "funding source" or voucher code in dispatch software so trips are countable without collecting personal health/disability information
- Extrapolate an estimate using the local veteran population as a percentage of the service area population, compared against a peer agency's actual ride volume
- Consider that many higher-income veterans are unlikely to use public transit regardless of a discount, so actual usage/cost may be lower than assumed

Consolidated Resources, Tips & Tricks

Stress Management

- Notice physical stress cues early (tension, shallow breathing, teeth grinding) as a signal to pause
- Use short breathing exercises in the moment when stepping away isn't possible
- Build in an intentional decompression routine (a commute, a walk, a hobby) to transition in and out of the workday
- Keep perspective by focusing on the mission/impact of the work, and envisioning the end point of a difficult task or project
- Normalize team check-ins that surface personal wins, not just business updates, to build connection between roles (e.g., dispatch and drivers)
- Promote the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) regularly and refresh how it's advertised (e.g., rotate posters) so staff notice it

Time Management

- Maintain a prioritized task list (paper, whiteboard, or digital) and physically cross off completed items
- Use a calendar consistently to track commitments and avoid double-booking
- Delegate tasks to build redundancy and cross-training across the team
- Create written, standardized processes/procedures and a companion cheat-sheet or checklist for common questions

- Write training materials in plain, simple language and involve multiple staff and leadership in drafting them for buy-in

Technology Tools Mentioned

- AI assistants for organization and drafting: ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot
- Microsoft Notes/OneNote-style pages and Microsoft Planner (Microsoft 365/Teams) for shareable notes and task tracking
- Dispatch/scheduling software: "Spare" (AI-assisted dispatch, rider app, after-hours AI voice agent) cited positively; legacy "RouteMatch"/TripSpark platform cited negatively
- MnDOT technology resources and consultants for evaluating and right-sizing transit software purchases
- MnDOT Transit Technology Grants as a potential funding source for new software

AI Tool Best Practices

- Always fact-check and review AI-generated content before relying on it, especially for policy or technical documents
- Correct the AI tool when it produces inaccurate information; most tools will revise the answer
- Avoid sharing sensitive personal or financial information with AI chat tools

Veteran Ride Program Options

- Free rides on fixed routes only, with ID/card verification
- Free rides across all service types at driver discretion for known veterans
- Referral-based model through the County Veteran Service Office (VSO), with quarterly invoicing/reimbursement (voucher model, no driver-side verification)
- Punch-card purchase model so the provider is compensated per ride without singling out riders
- Track eligible rides using a funding-source/voucher code in dispatch software rather than requiring drivers to verify disability status

Upcoming / Referenced Events

- MPTC Conference — October (mentioned as a valuable event for transit staff to attend)
- Next RTAP Peer Roundtable: September 17 — Topic: Budgeting and Finance

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