



A TICKET TO OPPORTUNITY

INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED
FROM THE OPPORTUNITY PASS
PILOT PROGRAM:

TWO YEARS OF FARE-FREE
PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION FOR
NEW ORLEANS YOUTH AGES 16-24



RIDE
AUGUST 2026



RIDE

ABOUT RIDE NEW ORLEANS

Ride New Orleans is an independent nonprofit 501(c)3 organization. *We envision a region in which taking transit enables full access to jobs, education, health care, and other needs that ensure the equitable, thriving community that all residents deserve. Our mission is to win world-class and equitable public transportation that works for all residents across the New Orleans region.* Visit www.rideneworleans.org to learn more.

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REPORT SPONSORS



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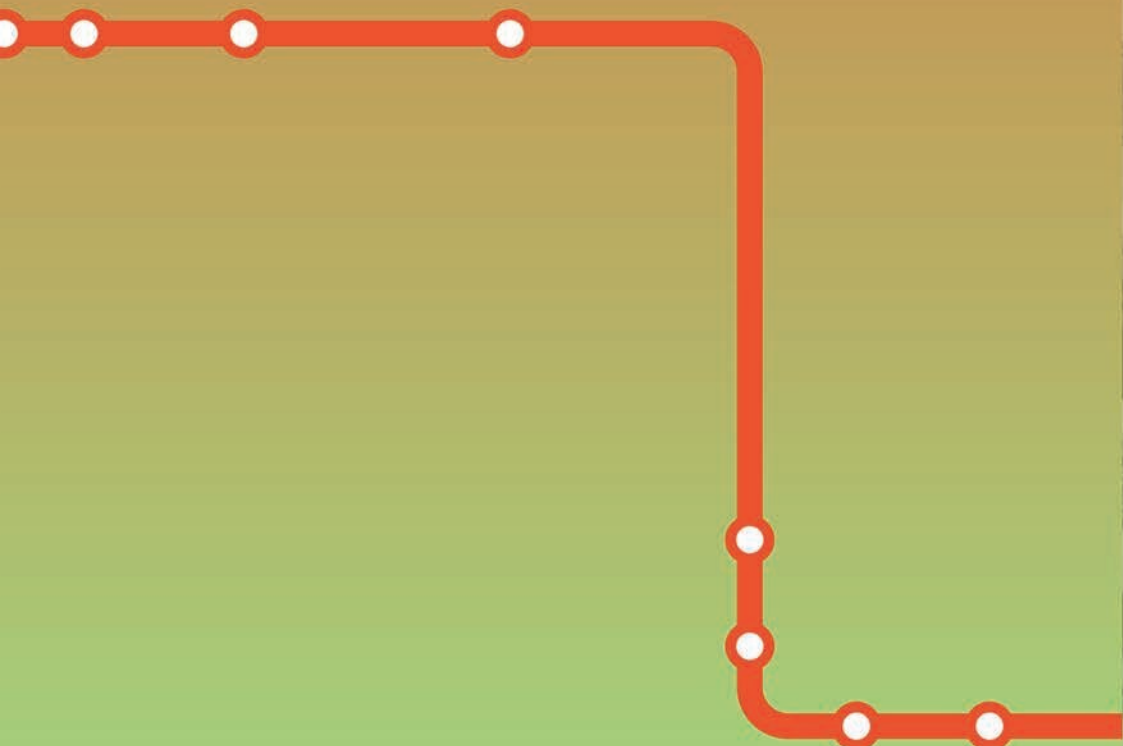


OPPORTUNITY PASS PROGRAM PARTNERS



Background & Program Overview.....	4
Youth Access to Opportunities Is Crucial For New Orleans' Future.....	11
By The Numbers: Pass Usage Data & Rider Demographics.....	12
Partner Organization Narratives.....	21
Insights from Focus Groups.....	26
Administrative & Logistical Lessons Learned.....	32
Next Steps.....	36

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Background & Program Overview

How It All Began

Access is opportunity. New Orleans' youth have continually told us that they need access to free transit to reach education, jobs, healthcare, and joy. This need had been communicated to Ride New Orleans (RIDE) repeatedly during outreach and engagement sessions and is outlined in the New Orleans Youth Master Plan.¹

In 2022, after extensive work with youth cohorts and partners at the New Orleans Children and Youth Planning Board (CYPB), RIDE published a white paper entitled *Fare-Free Transit for Youth in New Orleans*.² This paper outlined the dire need for low-barrier, free transit for young people in our city, and highlighted program examples from other cities. The report became the foundation for RIDE's advocacy on the topic, and piqued the interest of then-councilwoman Helena Moreno, who cited it while championing accessible transit for youth.

In 2023, alongside our partners at the New Orleans Children and Youth Planning Board (CYPB) and the Big Easy Budget Coalition (BEBC), we advocated for funding for a fare-free transit program for youth. We met with councilmembers and city leaders, as well as youth and youth-serving organizations around the city. In late summer, we won a one-time allocation of \$2.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to implement a zero-fare pilot program—originally slated to run for one year and later extended to two—for New Orleans youth ages 16-24.

The Opportunity Pass Program Launches

After a year of planning and fostering partnerships, the Opportunity Pass Pilot Program launched in September of 2024, as a joint effort between RIDE, the Regional Transit Authority (RTA), CYPB, the City of New Orleans, and the New Orleans Public Library. RIDE acted as the program's administrator, while RTA provided the transit passes (paid for by the City of New Orleans from the ARPA funds), and New Orleans Public Library locations were dedicated spaces for youth to enroll in the program and retrieve passes.

¹ New Orleans Children and Youth Planning Board (2026) *New Orleans Youth Master Plan*.
<https://nolayouthmasterplan.org>

² Ride New Orleans (2022) *Fare-Free Transit for Youth in New Orleans*.



Youth Transit Ambassadors and the Youth Voice

In the summer of 2024, to ensure the initiative reflected the youth it served, RIDE hired its first Opportunity Pass Program Youth Transit Ambassadors. The Ambassadors have been responsible for centering young people in decisions at every step of the programming process, from program development and branding to enrollment, outreach, and everything in between. In October 2025, RIDE hired former Youth Transit Ambassador Sam Strait as our full-time Youth Programs Coordinator. Together, this team of youth (with assistance from RIDE staff) has led the development of outreach, transit literacy, and social media materials; planned focus groups and other events; designed our surveys; and conducted all program outreach. From design through completion, the Opportunity Pass program has been created by youth, for youth.

Outreach, Engagement, and On-Site Bulk Enrollment

In addition to enrolling at library locations, youth could also enroll for the Opportunity Pass Program at any event where RIDE was tabling or hosting a transit literacy workshop. With support from our Youth Transit Ambassadors, RIDE has participated in 230 outreach sessions at career training centers, youth-serving organizations, the juvenile courthouse, resource fairs, community events, high schools, universities, recreation centers, and other youth spaces since the program began.



Transit Literacy Workshops

While free transit for youth was the foundation of the Opportunity Pass Program, it was about so much more than just free passes. During enrollment events, RIDE offered transit literacy workshops designed to ensure youth had the soft skills needed to ride transit independently and with confidence. We created unique sessions individually tailored to meet the needs of the group we were visiting. The sessions covered

important transit skills such as map reading, using the RTA Le Pass app, time management, trip planning, and more.

The Enrollment Process

Eligible youth were able to enroll in a digital Opportunity Pass at any New Orleans Public Library location or with RIDE staff during on-site bulk enrollment events. To enroll at the library, youth visited the front desk at any location and asked to sign up. No proof of identification or documentation was required. Library or RIDE staff were instructed to have youth complete a brief demographic questionnaire and enter the information into the program's online database. Staff would then ensure youth successfully downloaded the RTA Le Pass app and would provide a unique code which allows the youth to redeem daily (24-hour) transit passes that offer unlimited, free rides on all RTA buses, streetcars, and ferries. Youth can download and activate a pass daily, as needed, and ride as much as they want for the duration of the program.



City Deficit and ARPA Cut

In late 2025, the New Orleans City Council announced the City was facing a significant budget deficit, and it was considering every possible funding source to cover payroll, including recovering unspent American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars from programs like the Opportunity Pass. In December, City officials announced massive cuts to many programs, including a \$1 million cut to the Opportunity Pass Program's \$2.5 million allotment, to help balance the City's budget.

Prior to the CAO's announcement, RIDE had worked with our City program manager to ensure fiscal responsibility under the federal ARPA program and had arrived at projections indicating the program would be able to survive on a total budget of \$1.8 million. After cuts were announced, we advocated to the City CAO's office to reduce the funding cut from \$1 million to \$700,000 based on those projections. We received no response, and the City reallocated the full \$1 million.

Youth enrollment continued to grow, and by mid-2026 it became apparent that the cut would likely force an early termination of the program. RIDE and our partners determined it was necessary to cease additional enrollments effective August 14, 2026, in order to ensure that those already enrolled would be able to use their passes for as long as possible. However, based on current projections, it is possible the program may need to be terminated one to two months early (before EOY 2026) as a result of the funding cut, even after accounting for the freezing of new enrollments.

Paper Passes Introduced

During our program outreach and focus groups, we regularly heard that our most vulnerable youth – those without access to a reliable smartphone and data– needed physical passes instead of the digital passes we'd been offering. As a result, and to allow for the most equitable program possible, we began offering paper passes in June of 2026. In the first two months, nearly 200 youth who had previously been unable to take advantage of the Opportunity Pass program were enrolled in the paper pass option.

As with digital passes, the paper pass program could be enrolled in at library locations or through on-site enrollments with RIDE staff. Most paper pass users have enrolled at the Main Library, the New Orleans East Regional Library, or through direct RIDE outreach. The 31-day paper passes offer unlimited free rides on all RTA transit options for one month from activation. At the end of the month, youth return to the library of their choice or a RIDE team member to receive a new monthly pass.

Youth Transit Survey

Throughout the life of the Opportunity Pass pilot, the Ambassador team has released two youth transit surveys— a preliminary survey in 2025 and a more comprehensive one in 2026, which, at the time of writing, has over 300 responses. In addition to general demographic questions, the survey covered how often youth use transit, which routes they frequent, and their experiences using the transit system. Survey responses have allowed the RIDE team to improve the program and our youth-focused outreach efforts, as well as to better understand youth transit usage patterns and needs. A report analyzing data collected in the 2026 survey is forthcoming.



Focus Groups

In addition to extensive youth engagement conducted ahead of the Opportunity Pass Program's development, RIDE has hosted a series of quarterly focus groups with program participants. These focus groups have provided youth with an opportunity to share detailed feedback about the initiative, from enrolling in the program and obtaining passes to planning their trips and taking transit. These sessions helped us gain deeper insights into the topics explored in our surveys and other forms of outreach. Youth participating in the Opportunity Pass Program can RSVP for focus groups on a first-

come, first-served basis and are provided with stipends in the form of Visa gift cards for their time. At the time of writing, our focus groups have reached over 100 unique participants, averaging about 12 youth per session.

Sunsetting the Pilot

In July 2026, after consulting with our program partners, we decided to stop offering new Opportunity Pass enrollments effective August 14, 2026. This decision was made in response to robust participation in the initiative and the program's spend-down of funds. We opted for an equitable sunseting model that ensures enrolled youth can continue to access free transit for as long as possible before funding is depleted. As a result, youth who enrolled in the program before August 14 will be able to continue using their Opportunity Passes like normal until funds are exhausted.

The pilot program's overwhelming success demonstrates not only the critical importance of accessible transit for youth, but also what New Orleans youth can accomplish when given the opportunity. Identifying sustained funding for a permanent program is now critical to ensure that this generation of youth, and those to come, continue to have access to the opportunities they deserve.

"I have lots of dreams, and I need a way to get to those dreams." -Opportunity Pass User



Youth Access to Opportunities is Crucial for New Orleans' Future

Time and time again, our leaders point to critical issues facing our city: a shrinking population, a municipal budget crisis, hostile state and federal governments, and threats from a changing climate. For our city and region to succeed, we need a generation of young people with the resources, desire, and ability to address these challenges head-on. Community and political leaders continue to ask the same questions:

- How do we encourage New Orleans' young people to stay, work, and invest in our city?
- How can we ensure our region's youth have access to meaningful opportunities?
- How can we address a stagnant economy, a faltering job market, and an aging workforce?
- How do we make New Orleans a place where people want to live- and can do so comfortably?

Meaningful access to opportunities is the answer to these questions and many more. New Orleans' young people want meaningful opportunities, and they want to be involved in our city's future- but no amount of job training programs, educational opportunities, community healthcare offerings, or recreation will be helpful to youth who do not have an accessible and affordable way to reach them.

The Opportunity Pass, in tandem with RIDE's outreach and Youth Transit Literacy programming, helps produce a generation that is confident in navigating their community on public transportation. This builds not only individual confidence and access to opportunities but also bolsters ridership and, in turn, revenue for the RTA, contributing to a better transit system for everyone in the region.

"The Opportunity Pass means a lot to me because I've seen firsthand how transportation can either open doors for young people or completely shut them. I've worked with youth who had the motivation, talent, and drive to reach their goals but struggled simply because they couldn't get where they needed to go.

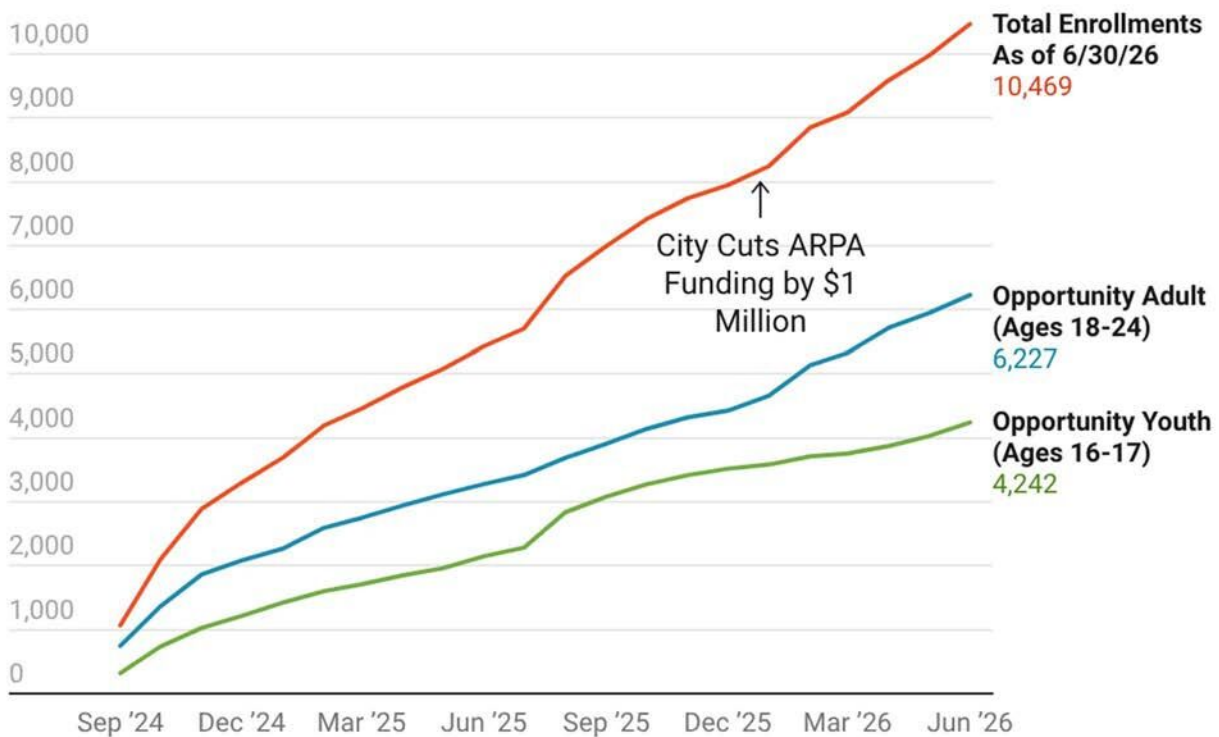
To me, transportation supports dreams. Whether a young person wants to get to school, a job, an internship, a training program, or even just explore new opportunities, they need a way to get there. The Opportunity Pass gives youth freedom, independence, and access to experiences that can change the course of their lives." -Sierra, Opportunity Youth & Transit Ambassador

By The Numbers: Pass Usage Data & Rider Demographics

As of the end of June 2026, the Opportunity Pass Program had 10,469 youth enrolled. Paper passes, launched as an option for youth without reliable smartphone access on June 1, 2026, accounted for 98 of these enrollments, while the remainder were digital enrollments through the LePass smartphone app.³

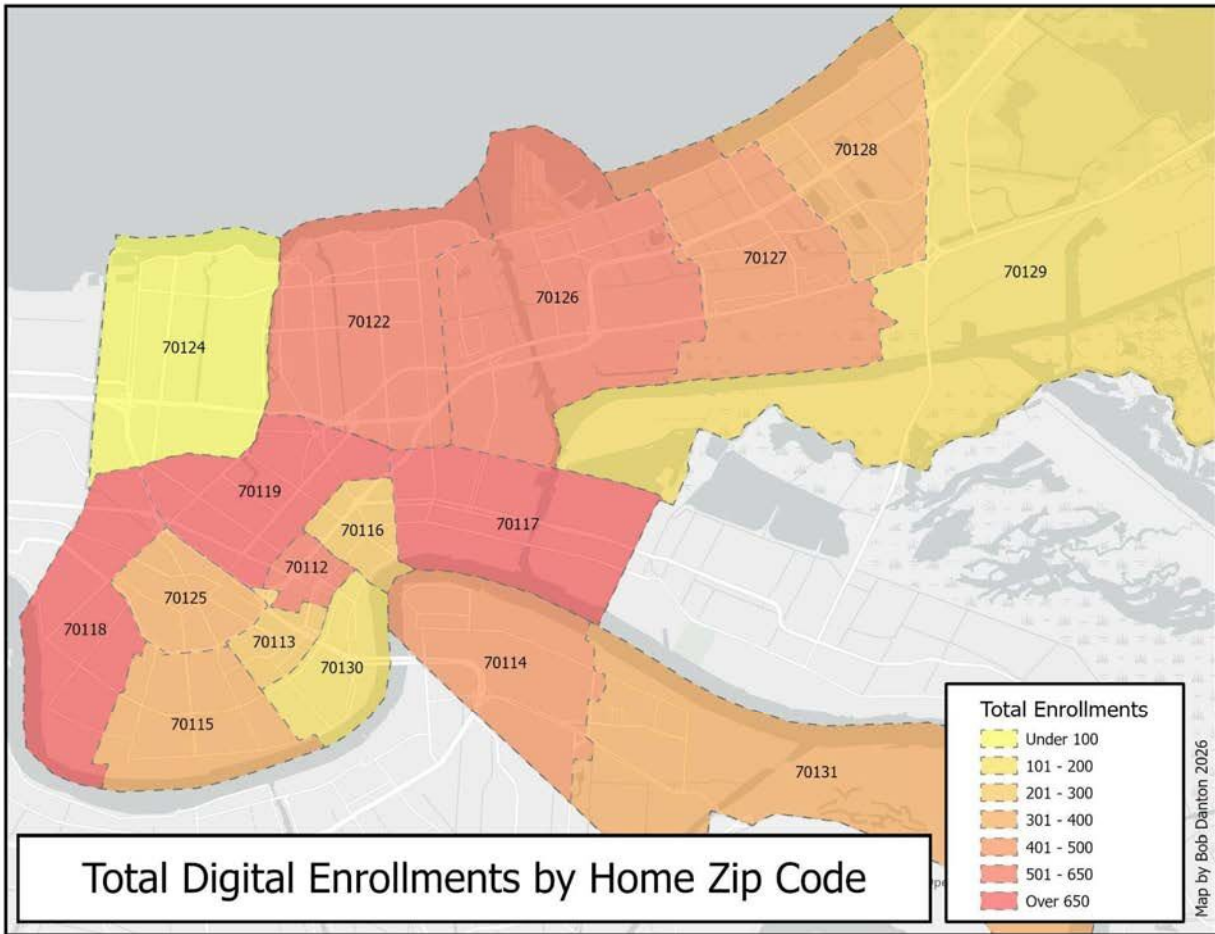
Enrollments & Activations

Growth of Opportunity Pass Enrollments Over Time



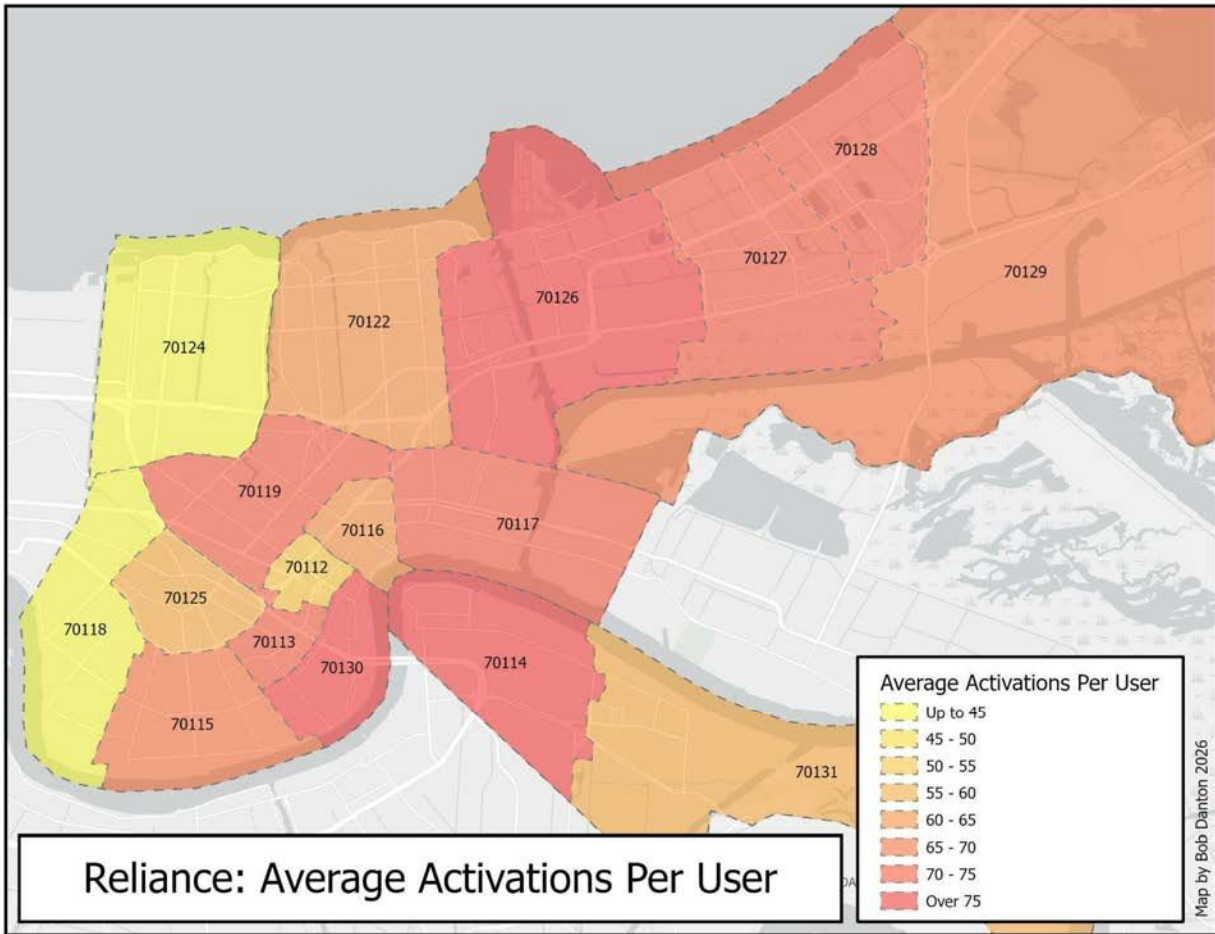
Data in this report are derived from information about either **enrollments** or **activations**. An enrollment represents a single unique Opportunity Youth (aged 16-24) who has signed up for the Opportunity Pass program. An activation represents a single instance of an enrolled youth using the digital pass option in the LePass app by activating a digital pass, which displays on their cell phone and provides unlimited free transit rides (bus, streetcar, and ferry) for 24 hours from the time of activation.

³ Unless otherwise noted, data included in this report are as of June 30th, 2026. "Growth of Opportunity Pass Enrollments Over Time" represents all Opportunity Pass enrollments. Other data and graphics represent data from digital (LePass App) enrollees only. Not all users provided demographic data; as a result, these data represent a majority sample of approximately 75% of all enrolled youth.



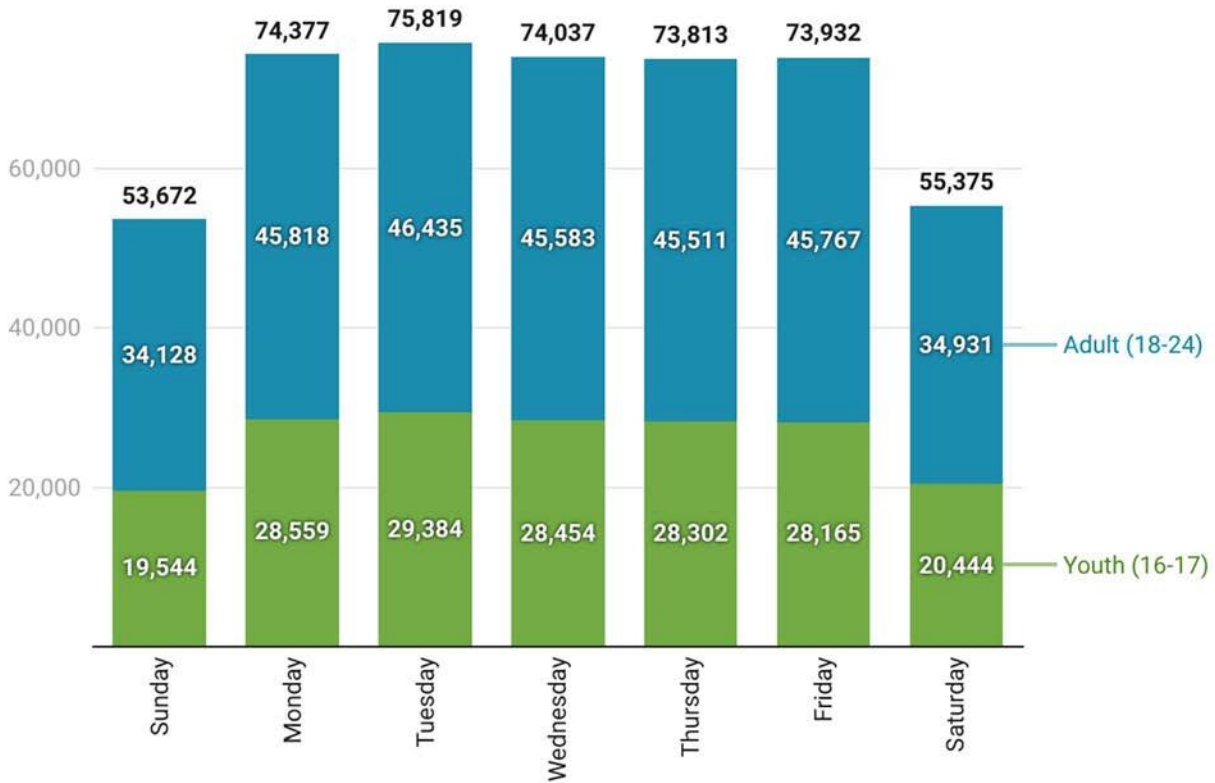
Opportunity Pass users come from every zip code in New Orleans (enrollment is limited to residents of Orleans Parish). The zip codes with the highest numbers of youth enrolled are 70118, 70117, and 70119. These zip codes cover Hollygrove, Leonidas, Carrollton, Uptown, Upper and Lower 9th Wards, Marigny, St. Claude, St. Roch, Mid City, Bayou St. John, and 7th Ward. The 70118 area code also includes the campuses of Tulane and Loyola Universities. These three zip codes include areas in all five of New Orleans' City Council Districts. The second-highest enrollment areas include Gentilly and New Orleans East.

"I'm a young single mother, and this Opportunity Pass [has] helped me get my son to and from school, it's helped me get him to doctor's appointments, and it's also a good experience for my son to be outside." -Opportunity Pass User

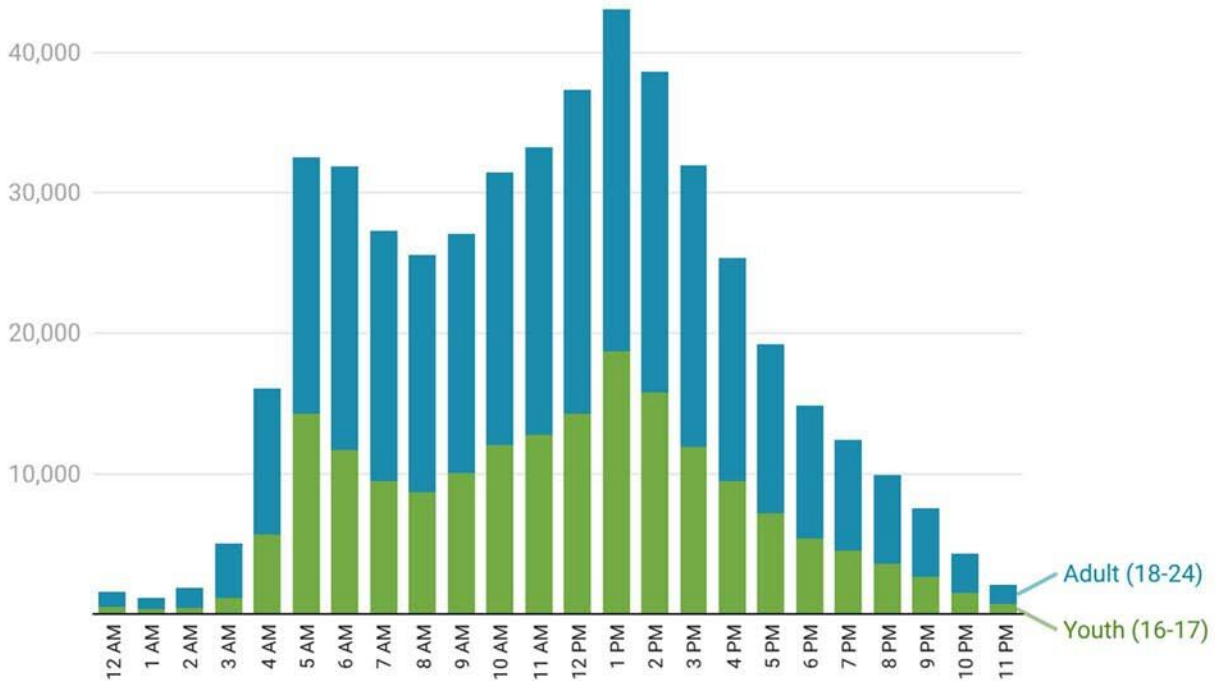


Examining the average number of pass activations per user across the city allows us to investigate areas where youth are relying on the program more heavily for regular transportation. The 70118 area, which includes Tulane and Loyola Universities and accounts for the highest number of total users enrolled, has the lowest rate of activations per user alongside Lakeview. This indicates that many of the college students enrolled in the program did not end up using the Opportunity Pass regularly. Meanwhile, Algiers and New Orleans East demonstrate very high numbers of activations per user, indicating that youth in these areas rely heavily on the program for daily transportation needs. Users in the Lower Garden District and Central Business District also have high numbers of average activations per user, followed by Mid-City, the Upper and Lower 9th Ward, Parts of the 7th and 8th Wards, and Central City. Many of these areas with high reliance on the program correlate with lower average incomes, higher proportions of Black residents, and higher percentages of households without access to a vehicle.

Digital Opportunity Pass Activations by Day of Week



Digital Opportunity Pass Activations by Hour of Day

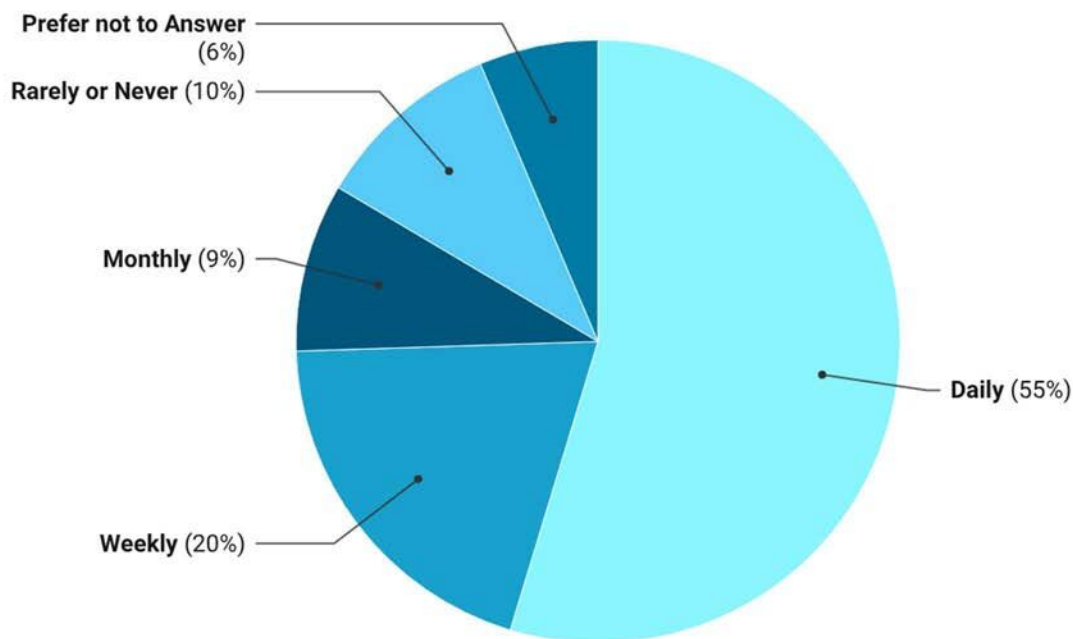


Analyzing the days and times at which digital passes are activated can provide insights into how youth may be using their passes. Significantly higher activations on weekdays and high activation numbers in the early morning suggest high usage for work, school, and job training commutes. This inference is supported by feedback on usage we have received in our focus groups and surveys. A peak of activations in the early afternoon may be tied to usage among service industry employees working evening or ‘second’ shifts, which generally run from 3-11 pm.^{4, 5} Evening and weekend activations may be tied to service industry work as well, or may represent youth using passes to access food, healthcare, childcare, and other necessities, or to reach opportunities for recreation and joy.

“It gives young people a chance to go to work, go to school, take care of, you know, young adult business, without having to worry about how they’ll get there, or having to worry about missing a certain appointment, or missing a job interview.”

-Opportunity Pass User

Self-Identified Frequency of Transit Use Upon Enrollment



⁴ Onpay (2026). *What are second shift hours? A guide for employers and employees.* <https://onpay.com/insights/second-shift-hours-guide/>

⁵ See Also: Ride New Orleans (2026). *2025 Hotel Worker Transit Survey Report.*

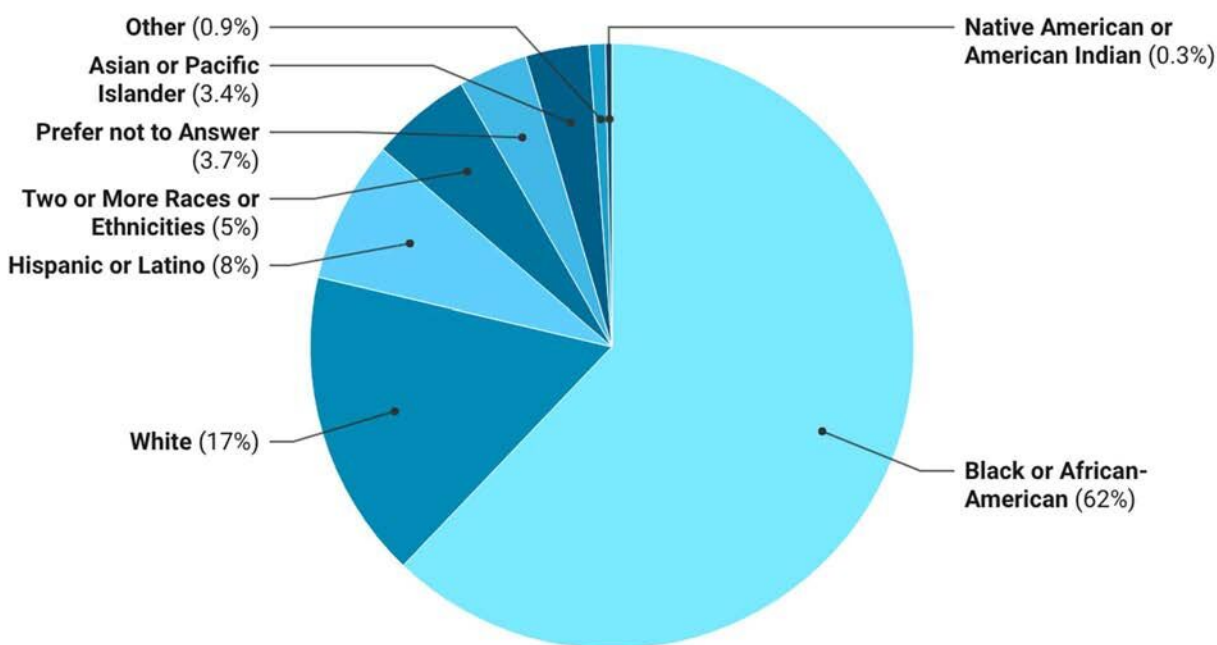
Upon enrollment, youth are asked to self-identify the frequency with which they currently utilize public transit. Over half of enrollees (55%) identified as daily transit riders, with an additional 20% identifying as weekly riders.

"I use transit more often since getting the Opportunity Pass because it removes the financial barrier of paying for each ride, making it easier to get to work, school, and other activities around the city without worrying about bus fare." -Opportunity Pass User

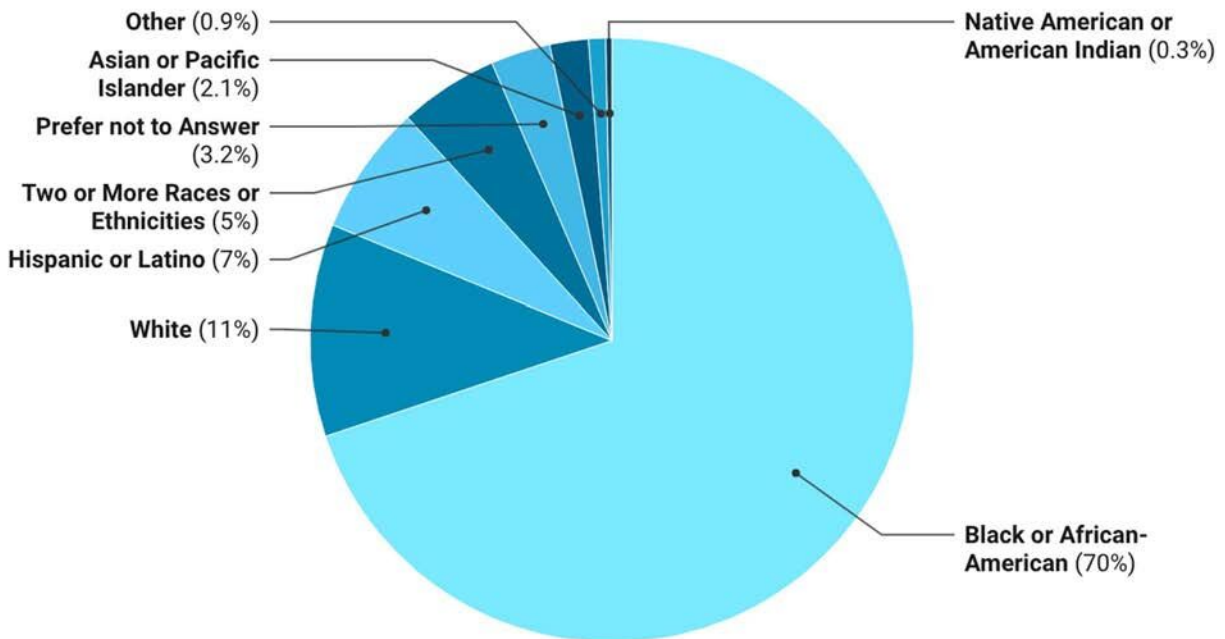
Demographics

The majority of enrolled Opportunity Pass users (62%) identify as Black or African American. This number is even higher for activations (70%), demonstrating that Black riders utilize the pass at significantly higher rates than white riders, who represent 17% of enrollments but only 11% of activations. Riders identifying as Hispanic or Latino represent 8% of enrollments, followed by those identifying as two or more races or ethnicities (5%), those who preferred not to answer (3.7%), Asian or Pacific Islander (3.4%), 'Other' (0.9%), and Native American or American Indian (0.3%).

Race or Ethnicity, By Percent of Enrollments



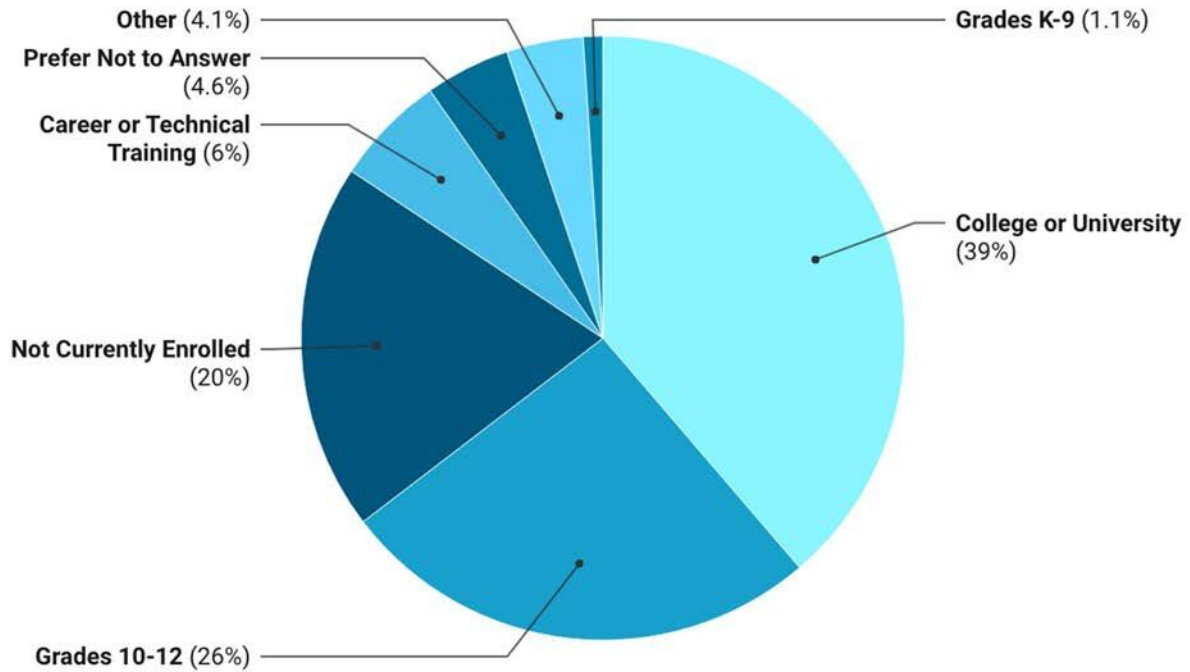
Race or Ethnicity, By Percent of Activations



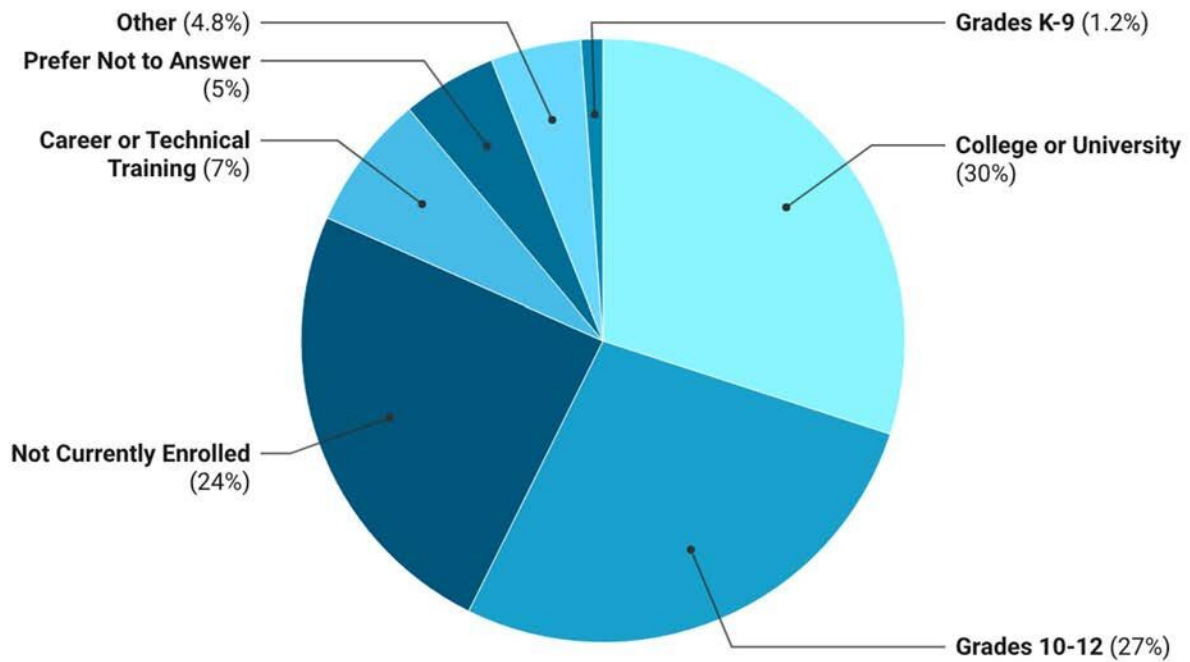
Youth currently enrolled in College or University represent the largest share of enrollments at 39%, but only account for 30% of activations, indicating that some of these youth rely less heavily on the Opportunity Pass for their daily transportation needs than other youth do. Those enrolled in grades 10-12 represent the second largest proportion of riders, accounting for 26% of enrollments and 27% of activations. Those not currently enrolled in school or career or technical training represent 20% of enrollments and 24% of activations, indicating a high reliance on the Opportunity Pass among this sector of youth, who are either in the workforce or disconnected from both work and school. Those enrolled in career or technical training programs represent 6% of youth enrolled and 7% of activations.

"Having the Opportunity Pass just means I don't have to worry about money when trying to get around, as I'm trying to save up for college." -Opportunity Pass User

Current Educational Enrollment, By Percent of Enrollments



Current Educational Enrollment, By Percent of Activations



The Opportunity Pass pilot has been a critical opportunity to gather data about youth's mobility needs. Information collected through enrollment, pass sales, and activations is complemented by surveys and focus groups facilitated by RIDE. Youth survey data will be the analytical focus of an additional report to be released later this year. As these projects continue to grow, we are learning more and more about where our region's young people need to go and how our systems need to change to facilitate better access to opportunity. A GIS mapping project of youth mobility is also underway at RIDE; continued access to affordable transit via the Opportunity Pass is critical to its success and to a better understanding of youth's needs more broadly.

"When I first started college, I had no idea how I was going to get to school and work every day. Then I got the Opportunity Pass ... and it has helped me in so many ways."
-Opportunity Pass User

Differential Demographics of Paper Pass Users

Due to the late rollout of the paper pass program, we have a limited amount of data with which to analyze their usage. Furthermore, because of the nature of the monthly physical pass medium, we are unable to collect information relating to activations, use times, etc. However, as of the time of writing, we do clearly see patterns in demographics that differ from those of digital pass users.⁶ 78% of paper pass enrollees identify as Black or African American. 33% are enrolled in high school, 32% are not currently enrolled in school, and only 15% are enrolled in college or university. 68% identify as daily or weekly transit riders. 28% reside in zip codes representing New Orleans East. Many reside at Covenant House (13%) and other group homes, and many others are unhoused.

⁶ The paper pass user data presented in this subsection represent users enrolled as of July 23, 2026.

Partner Organization Narratives

While data is helpful in analyzing use patterns, the program's growth over time, and in beginning to understand which sectors of opportunity youth rely most heavily on the program for their daily transportation needs, to truly understand the life-changing impact the program has had for thousands of young people, it is important to hear from youth themselves (whose voices are dispersed throughout this report), as well as from the partners and organizations that work closely with them. Many of these organizations likewise have critical data to report about how the program has affected the youth they serve, as well as how the cost savings provided in terms of transportation have allowed them to expand provision of other critical services.

Reconcile New Orleans is a workforce development organization serving young people aged 16-24 through a paid workforce training program, support services, and employment and education placement. Monique Robinson, LMSW, Chief Program Officer for Reconcile New Orleans and Café Reconcile, writes:

“Transportation has historically been one of the most significant barriers affecting program participation, attendance, retention, and access to employment opportunities.

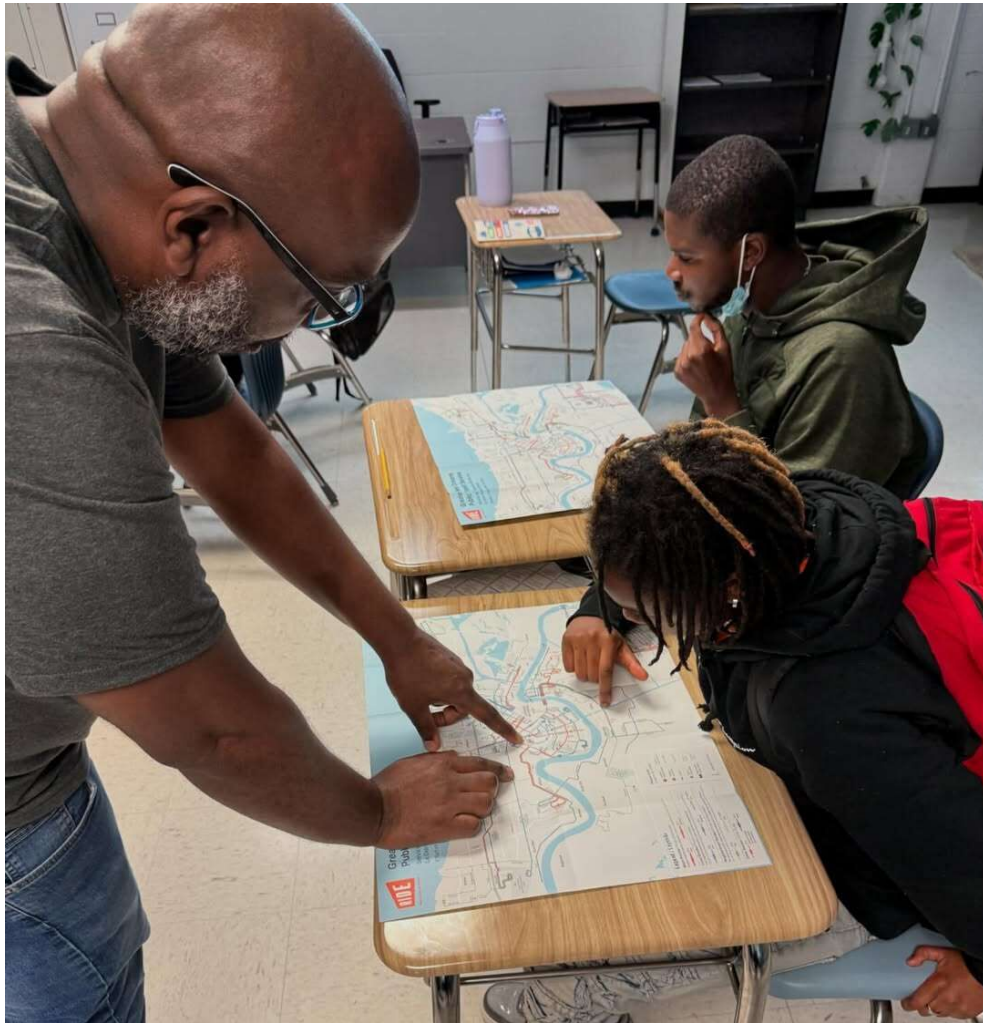
Since the launch of the Opportunity Pass Program in September 2024, we embedded the program in our training program by RIDE staff facilitating workshops and hosting focus groups to educate and encourage sign-ups resulting in a noticeable increase in use among our interns. Everyday young people use the Opportunity Pass app to access training, internships, interviews, employment & education, support services, and community resources throughout the Greater New Orleans area.

From an organizational perspective, the Opportunity Pass Program has significantly reduced transportation-related expenses. Prior to the program, Reconcile New Orleans spent approximately \$2,000 per quarter on bus passes and transportation assistance for participants. Since the implementation and increased use of the Opportunity Pass, our transportation expenditures have decreased by 50% allowing us to redirect limited program funds toward other critical support services that help young people succeed, including emergency assistance, career readiness needs, and employment retention supports.

In addition to the financial impact, staff have observed increased independence among participants as they navigate transportation options using the app. Young people report greater flexibility in accessing services, attending appointments, and maintaining employment without relying solely on program issued transportation assistance.

Over the almost 2 year period, close to 200 Reconcile interns signed up for the [Pass]. For 2026 we are 100% sign-ups thanks to the embedded monthly workshops.

The Program has been a valuable resource in helping reduce transportation barriers, increase access to opportunities, and maximize the impact of our workforce development resources. We appreciate Ride New Orleans' continued commitment to expanding transportation access for young people across our community."



The New Orleans Children and Youth Planning Board (CYPB) is a staff and planning board of youth and adults dedicated to assessing and addressing the physical, social, emotional, developmental, behavioral, educational, safety, and poverty impacts of children, youth, and families in their communities and assisting in the development of comprehensive plans to address their needs. CYPB was a critical partner in the development of the Youth Master Plan and in early advocacy for ARPA funding for the Opportunity Pass program. Maggie Hermann, Deputy Director of CYPB, writes:

“The Opportunity Pass is the implementation of a community priority and Youth Master Plan solution: affordable, youth-friendly transit. As facilitators and conveners of the Youth Master Plan, CYPB partners and youth leaders have been ambassadors and stewards of the Opportunity Pass program.

CYPB Youth Advisory Board members name the Opportunity Pass as not only symbolic of, but a real key to safety, access to opportunity, and belonging in New Orleans. Multiple Youth Advisory Board members turn to the Opportunity Pass when their personal vehicles are not accessible, one in particular used the pass daily to get from across the canal to their university uptown. Another named a relief and sense of safety the pass has given them, reflecting on an experience from a few years ago when they were denied bus entry because they didn’t have the \$1.25 fare.

The program’s design concepts and messaging strategies were co-created by youth leaders with lived experiences. Youth transit ambassadors were hired to lead key engagement, evaluation, and promotion activities of the program.

The design and implementation of the Opportunity Pass program brought systems together to center the needs and experience of young people. When accessing the library to sign up for the pass was a barrier, partners coordinated to provide on-site sign-ups at schools, youth programs, workplaces, and community events. When access to smart phones was a barrier, partners coordinated to launch paper passes.

Counter to policies and messages that police young people’s presence in public spaces, the Opportunity Pass invites and eases it.

The primary goal of the program is to remove the financial barrier to transit for youth and young adults, but cost is not the only factor in making a transit system accessible for current and future riders. The Opportunity Pass program has widely opened the door to youth engagement and leadership in shaping our city’s transit

system. Through program design, feedback tools, and strategy sessions, community and systems leaders have heard directly from youth about their overall rider experience -- including routes, signage, shelters, schedules, safety, and communication.

The Youth Master Plan solution calls for free transit for all. The Opportunity Pass is a start, and it has paved the path for even more transit solutions that meet riders' needs and ensure equitable, thriving communities in New Orleans."



The NET Schools are a collection of charter schools serving youth in Central City, New Orleans East, and Gentilly, whose mission is to provide students of all backgrounds with the skills, confidence, and experiences necessary to succeed in the education and career paths of their choice. Christie Kieschnick, Chief of Programs for the NET Schools, writes:

"Our students and alumni are incredible young people. Many of them experience multiple hardships that affect all aspects of their lives and education. We expect them to attend school regularly, pass their classes, graduate, obtain gainful employment, and be productive members of society while they are simultaneously living with financial struggles that affect access to food, housing, and transportation."

And those are just the absolute basics. If you consider other issues they are dealing with, such as crime, violence, mental & physical health, substance abuse, and racism, it is not surprising that our students have attendance issues and that our alumni don't make career progress at the rate of those who are more financially secure.

Anything that we can do to relieve any financial stresses of today's world is so important for our students and their futures, especially as we demand that they contribute back to our economic system.

The Youth Opportunity Pass Program has relieved one of those key financial stresses for our young people- daily transportation. This program has alleviated a burden and provided access to a basic need. This program has given hope."

Tim Spahn-Sattler, LRS Coordinator for the NET Schools, further notes that:

"Less than 10% of the AY 25-26 NET:CC Graduates had their driver's licenses when they received their diploma, and within the first 18 months of us providing case management and a \$450 scholarship, we had over 265 alumni and students who are at least 18 years old apply for our Driver's Ed program, meaning that a significant number of our alumni are relying on public transportation to connect them with employment, job training, and workforce development programs OR unable to access all that the city has to offer in terms of opportunities - so having the Opportunity Pass creates access and connections for our 16-24 year olds that need it most."

Insights from Focus Groups

Since the program launched, RIDE has conducted in-depth quarterly focus groups with Opportunity Pass users to obtain granular insights into how well the program has met their needs, its ease of use, and areas with room for improvement, as well as robust conversation about the transit system generally and how youth interact with it. Youth participants were provided with meals and stipends for their time. At the time of writing, over 100 youth have been engaged in these focus groups.

Opening Doors, Changing Lives

Overwhelmingly, the feedback on the Opportunity Pass program itself is that it has fundamentally changed youth's lives for the better. Youth across the board, from high school and college students to those in the workforce, the substantial population who both work and attend school, and those who are disconnected from education and employment, all agree that the Opportunity Pass has critically improved their ability to get where they need to go and significantly eased financial stress. They rely on it not only for access to education and employment but also for access to healthcare, food, recreation, and social connection. While \$45 monthly for a transit pass may not seem like much for some people, for the youth we spoke with, it is the difference between putting healthy groceries in their basket or not being able to, or the difference between choosing to walk miles in the summer heat to a doctor's appointment or riding safely in an air-conditioned bus. It can be the difference between continuing to attend school and not. They point to student debt, low wages, limited part-time work after school, rising rents, medical bills, and other financial pressures. As the end of the pilot nears, many youth have indicated stress and concern over how they will adapt if they lose access to the program.

"Opportunity equals access, and access equals opportunity." -Opportunity Pass User

Building Skills & Confidence

Aside from providing access, the Opportunity Pass has helped youth build confidence and skills. Across the board, youth in our focus groups reported using transit more frequently than before receiving the Opportunity Pass and are more comfortable navigating the transit system and the city as a result. Youth indicate that their increased comfort using transit has led them to engage with their communities in new ways they previously were unable to. Familiarity with their city and increased connection to their community, paired with educational and financial opportunities, are helping to create a generation of New Orleans youth who have the skills and desire to remain in the

community and help build its future. The Opportunity Pass is helping youth to feel like they are truly “part of the city.” Additionally, through their use of the system in conjunction with RIDE’s transit literacy and activities conducted in the focus groups, youth have developed transferable soft skills, including increased comfort with technology, wayfinding, time management, and map reading.

“It’s helped me to get out and explore and be a part of my community.” -Opportunity Pass User



The Transit System Needs Improvements

While youth in our focus groups continue to emphasize the critical importance of the Opportunity Pass program, they also consistently arrive eager to express frustrations and grievances with the transit system itself. Youth consistently speak to the stress caused by infrequent and unreliable service, vexation with schedules and routes that force them into lengthy, geographically indirect commutes with multiple transfers, and persistent issues with infrastructure and agency communications. Youth expound on hours-long commutes involving three or more buses, an inability to get where they need to go at night due to limited schedules, and stressful situations resulting from late and missing buses, live-tracking errors, and incomplete or inaccurate signage that affect riders of all ages across the system. They relate waiting for extended times in the heat and rain at stops without shelters, benches, or adequate lighting. They describe buses that are unclean and unmaintained, calling on the RTA to provide disinfectant wipes and sanitizer on buses and at stops. They speak about drivers and Rideline operators who are rude and disrespectful to them, and their frustrations waiting for unknown periods of time on buses or at stops while operators take unplanned breaks to smoke and call friends while dozens of riders sit on the bus without any sense of when they will reach their destination.

Youths' issues with the transit system itself were often so pressing, and their voices so deeply unheard on these issues, that the topic was difficult to move beyond in many of our groups. It is apparent not only that the system needs immediate and tangible improvements in reliability, service provision, infrastructure, cleanliness, and communications, but also that the RTA needs to make a concerted effort to provide transit-riding youth with meaningful opportunities to engage and express their needs. The youth in our groups were full of novel and insightful recommendations for the RTA to address many of these issues; it would benefit the agency and its ridership to provide meaningful engagement and feedback opportunities.

"It is humiliating to wait in the elements for an unreliable line. It is dehumanizing to pack together like sardines." -Opportunity Pass User

Transit-Riding Youth Need Complete Streets

When asked about their feelings of safety and comfort navigating the city and region on transit, we hear youth turn to infrastructure issues. Overwhelmingly, youth feel safe on transit vehicles. The aspects of their commutes that feel *unsafe* to them are primarily the first- and last-mile pedestrian connections to their transit commutes, particularly at night. They describe feeling unsafe in areas with broken or missing pedestrian-level

lighting, particularly at bus stops, and have called for safety improvements at stops such as blue-light call boxes in addition to lighting. Incomplete or missing sidewalks are often referenced as safety hazards that force youth to walk in busy streets, and areas lacking pedestrian crossings lead to youth dangerously navigating across busy streets to reach transit stops. These hazards are particularly difficult and dangerous for youth with disabilities. Certain underserved areas of the city, such as New Orleans East, are often cited as being especially hazardous.

Many youth also rely on bicycles as first- and last-mile connections and as a supplement to transit, and cite safety concerns due to a lack of protected bikeways and other bike-friendly infrastructure. Many youth have indicated that they would benefit from increased bike-transit connectivity, including additional bike spots on buses, the ability to bring bikes on streetcars, or expansions of the public bikeshare Blue Bike network to better connect them to transit and their destinations.

"I wish that there were more space for bikes because I have been unable to get on the bus I need since the bike rack is full." -Opportunity Pass User



Technical Difficulties

Aside from the issues youth face with the transit system itself and connecting infrastructure, the biggest issue youth faced in utilizing the Opportunity Pass pertained to smartphone and service dependency. Many youth indicated that the need to have a functional, charged smartphone with cellular service to get on transit proved to be a stressor and a barrier. Those with long commutes related difficulties ensuring their phone held a charge through the end of the day to allow them to get home safely, calling for the availability of outlets at stops or on buses to allow them to recharge, or for physical pass options that don't rely on their phones. They recalled being left stranded when their phone batteries died, with operators refusing to let them board. Others had issues with intermittent service, including at times when they were financially unable to pay their phone bills, forcing them to find Wi-Fi access to purchase and activate their passes before traveling to their transit stops. Along with these factors, there were also instances of technical issues within the LePass app, with some users being locked out of the Opportunity Pass program for unknown reasons or experiencing the app malfunctioning, although these issues were far less common. These factors, as well as the numerous youth without access to a smartphone at all, led to the launch of the paper pass option in June of 2026. Any future iteration of the program should ensure there are options for those without reliable access to technology.

"When you have the Opportunity Pass, you live and die by your phone." -Opportunity Pass User

Enrollment & Administrative Difficulties

In general, youth found the enrollment process simple and easy to navigate. However, there were occasional administrative difficulties or misunderstandings. In several cases, youth enrolling at library locations were asked to show identification, which was not required by the program for registration. RIDE worked quickly with library staff to clear up misunderstandings and ensure all staff were properly trained in the enrollment process.

Youth Need Regional Accessibility

In the second year, our focus groups began to explore youth's geographic travel needs and mobility patterns more deeply. We are in the early stages of a GIS mapping project using data from focus groups and surveys to explore youth mobility patterns in order to better understand and advocate for a system that meets their travel needs. Our early findings indicate strongly that youths' travel needs and desires do not stop at the parish

line. Youth in our focus groups have repeatedly called for expanding the Opportunity Pass program to include Jefferson Parish, where many have jobs, relatives, healthcare appointments, and a desire to reach food and recreation opportunities. Most of the destinations youth have indicated that they would like to take transit to, but are unable to, are in Jefferson Parish, on both banks of the river. They have also called for better integration of routes and schedules between the RTA and JP Transit, and have pointed to travel limitations caused by a lack of evening and weekend service in Jefferson Parish. Youth have also indicated a desire to reach other destinations in the Greater New Orleans area, including Slidell and St. Bernard Parish.

"I love the Opportunity Pass. I hope it stays forever. Youth deserve to be able to get around their city!" -Opportunity Pass User



Administrative & Logistical Lessons Learned

A key component of any pilot program is assessing what worked and what didn't, to refine practices for future permanent implementation. While the enrollment numbers and feedback from youth and partners show us the overwhelming need for the program and the positive impact it has had on thousands of New Orleans' young people, there are nevertheless important lessons to be learned from the pilot in terms of administrative, financial, and program management.

Invoicing Miscalculations

On September 5, 2025, RIDE was notified by the RTA that “due to a formula error in the invoicing process,” the RTA (in conjunction with its fare distribution partner Token Transit) had been significantly under-billing the City of New Orleans for the first 11 months of program operations, leading to highly skewed initial spending projections as the program headed into its second year.⁷ For some individual months, the error resulted in underbilling by more than 50% of actual monthly spending, and over the 11-month period, the cumulative discrepancy was \$131,678. While the issue was addressed and the discrepancies billed, the significant increase in projected monthly spending significantly altered the anticipated timeline on which the program funds were set to be expended, and early miscalculations likely influenced the City's decision to reclaim ARPA funding from the program, eventually leading to the need for earlier sunseting of enrollments before the end of the second program year.

Marketing & Advertising

Under the RTA's cooperative endeavor agreement (CEA) with the City of New Orleans, the City agreed “to pay for the RTA marketing and advertising created and disseminated on RTA's Le Pass app, buses, streetcars, and ferries for the pilot program, capped at \$100,000.”⁸ Because the CEA was between the City and the RTA, any procurements needed as part of the program would be subject to the Federal Transit Administration's procurement requirements. RTA staff put together an overview of the agency's procurement process to assist with timeline development and planning. Planning for the marketing campaign began in January 2025; RIDE hosted a meeting with Opportunity Pass partners to clarify and align goals for external program communications. During the meeting, partners agreed on a youth-centered plan and

⁷ New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, email communication to Ride New Orleans Staff, September 5, 2025.

⁸ Cooperative Endeavor Agreement between the City of New Orleans and the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, executed November 6, 2024.

timeline for the initiative's advertising, social media, and marketing. Representatives from each partner organization and agency would serve on a "communications cabinet," which would meet regularly to develop and/or approve marketing language and imagery, and ensure all partners were accurately represented.

To ensure the deliverables remained youth-centered, RIDE and our Youth Transit Ambassadors prepared a job scope that reflected a youth-centered vision for marketing the Opportunity Pass Program. The job scope included hiring dedicated Youth Outreach Ambassadors to assist with program promotion and enrollments, a strategy to boost social media advertising for the program, and the creation of a promotional video created for and by community youth. Video production would be completed by a youth-serving organization, NOVAC, a local video production company committed to teaching young people film-industry skills. RIDE youth would serve as collaborators for this process.

In response to the youth-designed scope, the RTA released a bid for a marketing company to support and enhance the youth's advertising vision for the program. In August 2025, the RTA brought on a marketing firm to work on the Opportunity Pass campaign.

RIDE and Youth Transit Ambassadors were available to provide guidance and feedback to the marketing firm, which was hired and managed by the RTA. However, over the following months, issues arose around repeated missed deadlines and delays; inaccurate information retained in drafts after RIDE made corrections; imagery and text that strongly resembled AI-generated content and did not reflect the youth vision; and a persistent lack of response from points of contact at the company. These issues were exacerbated when the City of New Orleans announced a budget deficit and hinted at reallocating ARPA funds to help offset the shortfall, causing additional delays in marketing production and uncertainty around the program's future. Multiple issues also arose with the onboarding and payment of the firm's Youth Outreach Ambassadors, which reflected poorly on the mission and vision of the pilot program.

On March 19—after eight months with few results—RIDE met with leadership in RTA's marketing department and formally requested that the contract with the firm be terminated, citing multiple occasions in which we believed the firm was unable to provide appropriate deliverables in the time allotted. The request was denied. RIDE responded by creating an alignment document, shared with the RTA in an attempt to streamline partner workflows and ensure deliverables were completed in a timely manner. This, too, was rejected as "out of scope," per the RTA's legal department.

At the time of writing, several deliverables have eventually been made available; however, due to the massive delays and the need to freeze enrollments to the program, they are now unusable without major edits. Based on these experiences, we recommend that any future marketing for the Opportunity Pass be housed with a youth-centered community organization, in partnership with the agency.

Mobile Pass Management

At the outset of the program, Opportunity Pass users could “download” up to two 24-hour passes to their phones via the LePass app at any time. Once activated, passes are available for 24 consecutive hours, and only one pass can be activated at a given time, ensuring that youth are not able to “spend” more than one pass per day. The RTA did not invoice the City for downloaded passes until they were activated. Youth indicated that this feature was incredibly helpful in managing transit access when their cell phone service was intermittent. Many youth had cell phones without reliable service, and relied on Wi-Fi access at schools, home, or businesses to “download” their passes, which could then be activated as needed at transit stops where Wi-Fi was not available. On July 15, 2026, without consulting or notifying the Opportunity Pass program managers at RIDE or the program representative at the City of New Orleans, the RTA abruptly changed the setting in the LePass app to prevent users from storing more than one pass. This led to widespread confusion among youth, with many believing the program had ended abruptly or that they had been removed from the Opportunity Pass program entirely. RIDE outreach, once alerted by affected youth, worked quickly to reach enrolled youth via email, social media, and updates to library staff and youth-serving partners to clear up unnecessary confusion and educate youth about the sudden change to the program.

Enrollment and Database Management Systems

The systems designed for the pilot program proved to be complex, inefficient, and ultimately not ideally designed for enrollment and user database management. Complex input needs from the RTA’s Token Transit system and the lack of dedicated tech support led to a design that proved difficult to manage and scale. Jotform was utilized as a front-end to input digital pass users’ information into the Token Transit system. Differences between the RIDE team’s on-site enrollment form and the one used by the Public Library led to data gaps in the databases of user information and demographics. Technical difficulties with Token Transit were unable to be addressed by the RIDE team, who did not have access to the system, often causing delays in addressing malfunctions. The addition of paper passes to the system later in the pilot forced an ad-

hoc database design to ensure that users registering for paper passes were not already enrolled in the digital pass option. To achieve this, the RIDE team had to design a user management and database system using Softr and Airtable, which proved difficult for librarians to navigate. The use of four separate input and data management platforms was inefficient, unnecessarily complex, and imperfect. Looking toward a permanent program, it will be crucial to design and implement a single, streamlined system seamlessly integrated into the RTAs fare product design, which is currently undergoing a study toward modernization.



Photo courtesy of UnCommon Construction

Next Steps

“The Opportunity Pass has been a great help for my family ... At one point I was walking 30 minutes just to get to the doctor’s office, as a pregnant person, and that was not fun in the middle of the heat ... I could not do without it at this point.”

-Opportunity Pass User

Funding

With thousands of youth now relying on the Opportunity Pass program for daily access to school, work, healthcare, and joy, it is critical to ensure the program continues. To do so, financial support is urgently needed. The ARPA funds that sustained the pilot will be exhausted before the end of 2026. While City leaders have indicated their continued support for the program, the current municipal deficit means that funding from the City’s upcoming fiscal year budget to continue the program in 2027 is unlikely. With the City of New Orleans currently unable to fund the program, an external sponsor is urgently needed to ensure that thousands of youth who rely on it are not left behind. Based on current projections, sustaining the program is estimated to cost around \$750,000 annually, including administrative costs.

RIDE, with the support of City leadership, is currently seeking one or more sponsors- corporate, foundation, or otherwise- to fund the program in 2027, with the hopes that the City will be able to stabilize its budget and allocate permanent funding to the program beginning in 2028. We are calling on allies across the city to help us find a sponsor or donor who will step up to give thousands of New Orleans young people the freedom and opportunity they need and deserve.

“Sustained funding for the Opportunity Pass program is crucial to set the young people of New Orleans up for success. It has become a trusted safety net to many, allowing them to make their way to education, employment, friends and family, joy, and more: to build their futures no matter their financial situation. Furthermore, youth have reported feeling more supported, engaged, and connected to their city, encouraging them to spend their lives here rather than elsewhere. I hope that this resource is available long into the future to continue being a fixture in the lives of the young people of New Orleans, removing the financial barrier of getting from place to place, and providing a springboard to accessing opportunity.” -Sam, RIDE Youth Programs Coordinator

Fare Modernization & Regional Passes

The RTA is currently in the early stages of a fare modernization study and plan. As this work continues and we look forward to the future of the Opportunity Pass program, it is crucial that the study considers integrating the Opportunity Pass. This will ensure ease of use for youth, address issues with reliance on cellular phones, and significantly streamline the program, reducing administrative costs. These practices have already been adopted in peer cities that provide free transit for youth (and, in many cases, also for low-income residents, seniors, and those with disabilities). In the Los Angeles and Seattle areas, youth can claim free physical or digital tap cards that provide them with unlimited free transit on multiple transit systems across their respective metro areas.^{9, 10} In San Francisco, youth can ride the Muni system for free without a fare product, encouraged to carry a school or other ID to validate their age at the operator's request.¹¹ A modern, regional (including JP Transit) fare product for youth available in both digital and physical formats would solve nearly all of the programmatic challenges encountered in the pilot program.

Free Fares for All

Free transit has changed the lives of thousands of youth in New Orleans through the Opportunity Pass program. But youth are not the only residents of our city who would benefit from zero-fare public transit. Across the country, agencies are increasingly offering programs to provide free transit to other vulnerable populations, including low-income families, seniors, and people with disabilities. Recognizing that only a small fraction of most agencies' operating revenues come from fares, and the high costs associated with collecting fares, maintaining farebox systems, and of personnel associated with fare collection, major transit agencies across the country are now piloting or permanently adopting programs that provide *free fares for all*. Among them are Richmond, VA;¹² Memphis, TN;¹³ Tucson, AZ;¹⁴ and Albuquerque, NM,¹⁵ and many more are now looking into the possibility of eliminating fares, with New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani recently bringing the call for free public transportation into the national spotlight. As we look to the future, we must look to our peers. New Orleans currently has no line item in the City's budget supporting public transportation. Making transit free

⁹ LA Metro (2026). *GoPass*. <https://www.metro.net/fares/gopass/>

¹⁰ Orca (2026). *Youth Ride Transit for Free!* <https://info.myorca.com/youth-ride-free/>

¹¹ SFMTA (2026). *Free Muni for All Youth*. <https://www.sfmta.com/fares/free-muni-all-youth-18-years-and-younger>

¹² GRTC (2026). *How to Ride*. <https://www.ridegrtc.com/rider-guide/how-to-ride/>

¹³ MATA (2026). *Fares*. <https://www.matatransit.com/fares/>

¹⁴ SunTran (2026). *Fares & Passes*. <https://www.suntran.com/fares-passes/>

¹⁵ City of Albuquerque (2026). *ABQ RIDE Zero Fares*. <https://www.cabq.gov/transit/how-to-ride/zero-fares>

for all is not an impossibility. If our civic leaders choose to invest in our transportation and in our residents, New Orleans too could join the ranks of the cities moving forward into a more equitable and accessible future.

“Public transportation is a human right.” -Opportunity Pass User





WORLD CLASS TRANSIT FOR NEW ORLEANS