

**Committee on Rules  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Roundtable Series on Ending Hunger in America**

**Written Testimony of  
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I met a woman on the bus the other day. Through casual conversation she learned that I was the CEO of KCATA (branded as RideKC regionally). She could not thank me enough for making regional transit “free” to customers. She told me the money she used to spend on fares now enables her to pay for groceries and medicine. My new acquaintance shared with me some of her day-to-day struggles to make ends meet. Like her, 58% of RideKC customers are African American, and like her, 72% of RideKC customers do not have a car available to them.

During the pandemic of 2020, public transit emerged as a lifeline, ensuring essential workers kept the country breathing. Despite the great loss and turmoil endured in 2020, public transportation remains that one thing that connects people to the opportunities that improve lives, change lives, even save lives. And it hasn’t gone unnoticed. There has been a shift in public perception as transit has clearly demonstrated its vital role as an “essential service.”

RideKC fulfills its mission to connect people to opportunities by focusing on the Four Pillars of Access: **Access to Jobs, Education, Healthcare and Housing, built on a foundation of Social Equity**. Kansas City’s Zero Fare transit initiative is one way that RideKC is improving access to opportunities for people who need it most by eliminating the barrier and burden of fare payment. Zero Fare immediately puts that \$1.50 cash fare to work in household budgets and in the local economy.

RideKC is the first transit agency in a major U.S. metropolitan area to implement Zero Fare transit in the last two decades. We navigated toward Zero Fare over several years, first offering all veterans free rides (2017), then high school students, then safety net providers. As KCATA launched its third bus rapid transit route (Prospect MAX) with Zero Fare, support from the community and elected officials grew.

Zero Fare has been in place systemwide since March 2020. For those living paycheck to paycheck, even the \$50 income they would have spent on a monthly bus pass will improve the quality of life in the Kansas City area. It has increased ridership, sped up boarding time and improved operator safety by eliminating the source of 90% of driver-involved disturbances. In fact, between 2019 and 2020, on-board safety incidents reduced 39%.

Because of Zero Fare, ridership has recovered at a faster pace in KC than nationally. In April 2020, while most of the country's transit ridership was just 20% of 2019 levels, RideKC's ridership held at 58% of 2019 levels. By October 2020, national ridership was still just 40% of 2019 levels, while RideKC had rebounded to 80% of 2019 levels.

Two local studies have shown positive community benefits of a Zero Fare program. A 2019 study by the Center for Economic Information in the University of Missouri - Kansas City's (UMKC) Department of Economics states that the regional financial impact of Zero Fare will be between \$13 and \$17.9 million<sup>1</sup>. The UMKC study also reports how people will maximize the financial resources they realize by not paying a fare. According to the study, it will be spent in four key areas: housing (55%), health care (18%), retail-groceries and other purchases (15%), and insurance (11%).

The Mid-America Regional Council's (MARC) econometric forecast model estimates the annual economic impact of continuing suspended fares is likely to raise regional economic output by \$4.2 to \$13.8 million and personal income by \$1.3 to \$4.6 million.<sup>2</sup> MARC's analysis indicates that Zero Fare is likely to increase ridership between 20% and 60%.

The City of Kansas City, Mo., has committed \$4.8 million per year to fund Zero Fare. In our first private sector Zero Fare partnership, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Kansas City (Blue KC) has agreed to fund up to \$1 million toward the success of this initiative. Blue KC values a healthy community and through its mission wants to help Kansas Citians access opportunities for employment, education and quality food, which is vital to the overall health of our neighbors, family and friends.

At RideKC we are not just talking the talk. We are walking the walk with programs like Zero Fare. We are taking the blinders off and looking beyond the numbers to see real people, like the hard-working woman I met on the bus. Our Zero Fare initiative is pumping money back into the community and the local economy. By weaving ourselves into the fabric of the community, RideKC is positioned to be a part of the solutions for the community.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://zerofarekc.com/documents/2/Zero\\_Fare\\_-\\_UMKC\\_Study\\_-\\_Final\\_021820.pdf](https://zerofarekc.com/documents/2/Zero_Fare_-_UMKC_Study_-_Final_021820.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.marc.org/Transportation/Plans-Studies/pdfs/Transit-Zero-Fare-Impact-Analysis.aspx>