



Turning the RIPTA Bus Around: A Management Plan for Service, Safety, & Stability

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I. Executive Summary

Rhode Island's public transit system is in crisis. Currently, in Fiscal Year 2026, RIPTA faces an internal deficit of roughly \$10 million that has forced major service reductions, driven ridership declines, and left riders and drivers frustrated. The result is eroded public trust, stranded riders, and a workforce experiencing rapid burnout. Aside from its financial and operational woes, RIPTA has generally lost the trust and confidence of Rhode Islanders due to a lack of safety on its buses and a lackluster passenger experience. To improve the public perception of RIPTA, it needs to be viewed by Rhode Islanders as a safe and reliable mode of transportation, which will, in turn, transform it into a robust public service in the State.

The proposed solution is the "Reliability and Restoration Action Plan", a four-pronged strategy that utilizes existing legal authority and partnerships rather than relying on new state funding. This plan will oversee the launch of a Community-Based Safety Ambassador program in conjunction with the Department of Corrections and the Judiciary. It will also redesign driver schedules to allow for proper breaks and upgrades to rest facilities. To spur ridership growth, the plan will deploy microtransit vehicles to fill first- and last-mile connectivity gaps and establish a "Ride Free with RIPTA" bulk-purchase agreement with major employers such as CVS Health.

Key requirements are modest but targeted: reallocation of underused FTA formula funds (Sections 5307, 5311, and JARC), a \$150,000 six-month pilot for the Ambassador program,¹ two to three new grants and data specialists, and formal MOUs with RIDOC, RIDOT, and private employers. The plan rolls out in five phases over twelve months, starting with a federal funding strategy team and ending with sustained employer partnerships. Upon execution, the plan will restore service reliability, rebuild public confidence, and reposition RIPTA as a transit system Rhode Islanders can once again rely upon.

II. Good Luck Catching the Bus

Much like one of its buses, the RIPTA has been running behind schedule with no guarantee of catching up, and the consequences extend well beyond its balance sheet. The quasi-public agency started Fiscal Year 2026 with a projected \$32.6 million operating deficit, which, after an appropriation of \$15 million from the Rhode Island General Assembly, as well as favorable fuel prices and pension investment returns, was reduced to \$10 million.² Despite progress, arriving at the stop \$10 million short is no joke, and as a result, RIPTA implemented the largest service reductions since its founding in 1966, impacting 45 out of 63 transit routes.¹ This meant that, with the exception of five cities and towns, 34 out of 39 municipalities experienced a vast reduction in service frequency, as well as the partial or complete elimination of routes.¹

Since the implementation of service reductions, annual scheduled hours have dropped by 113,684, while ridership on affected routes has fallen by 14%.¹ This drop in ridership is compounding RIPTA's financial problems. It's creating a dangerous, continuous "death spiral": fewer riders mean less revenue, leading to further cuts, making service less reliable, and pushing riders away. To make matters worse, these cuts aren't just impacting current RIPTA customers; they are eroding public trust in the transit system. When riders lose confidence in the system's reliability and accessibility, it becomes much harder for RIPTA to recover financially.

¹ Providence Streets Coalition. (2026, January). *2025 service cuts impact report: Assessing the crisis in Rhode Island transit*. https://pvdstreets.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Service-Impacts-Report_package.pdf

² Shea, C. (2025, December 17). *RIPTA once again counts on Gov. McKee to fill its budget gap*. Rhode Island Current. <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2025/12/17/ripta-once-again-counts-on-gov-mckee-to-fill-its-budget-gap/>

Service reductions have also forced RIPTA to operate under increased strain. Drivers have reported overcrowding: 70% are forced to leave passengers at stops due to full buses at least once daily, and 91% run late at least once daily.¹ Jorge Alvez, an operator, expressed that, “It has become very stressful to work because the pressure is always on you to go faster, to do more, to get more done within the same amount of time.”³ These conditions have taken a serious toll on the workforce: 52% of interviewed operators reported considering resignation, while 88% stated they found it difficult to take breaks, eat, and even use the bathroom,¹ factors which further threatens workforce stability.

Here is the thing: For thousands of Rhode Islanders, RIPTA is not optional—it is a necessity that directly determines access to work, food, healthcare, and community life. In 2025 alone, the annual ridership reached approximately 12.5 million.⁴ When service is reduced, the consequences are immediate and severe, as a Kingstown resident explains: “I rely on the 69 to go to the grocery store, library, pharmacy, and other places with my 8-year-old son. I do not have a car because of my disabilities. The 69 no longer runs on weekends. This is a big issue for us because now we can’t go to church or anywhere else.”¹

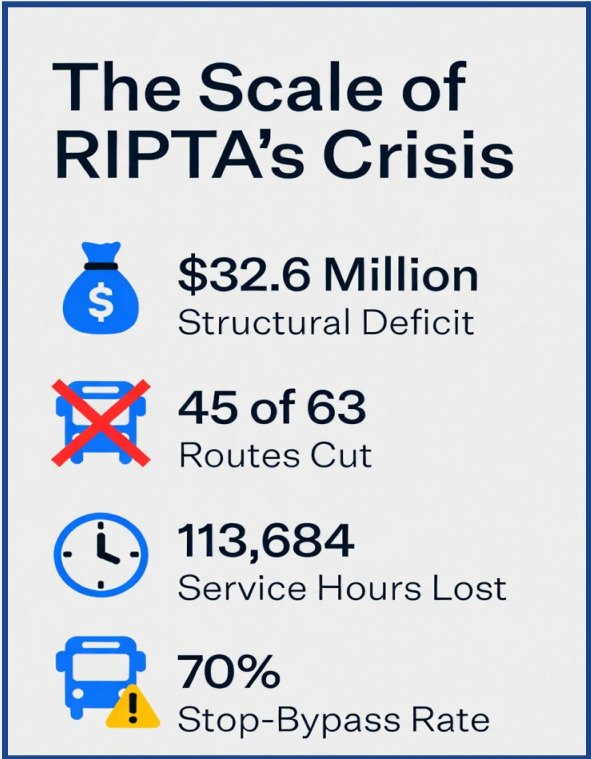
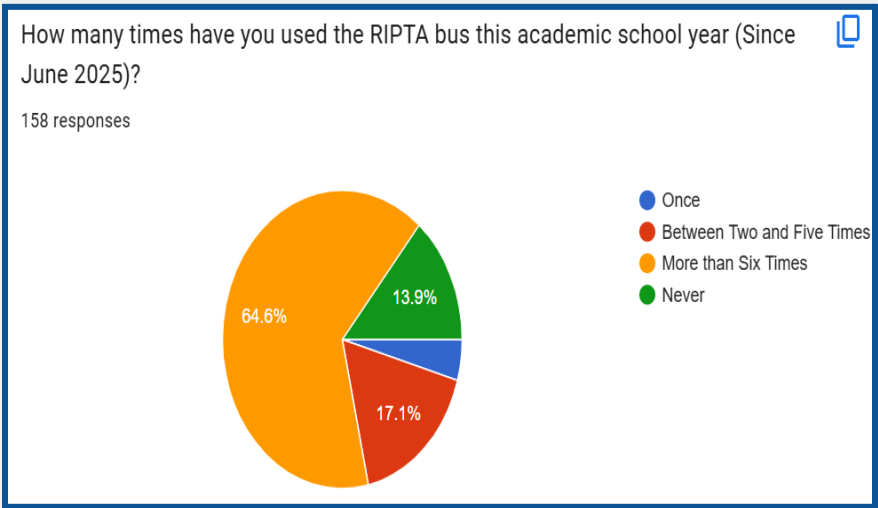


Figure 1: The Scale of RIPTA's Crisis

In a campus-wide survey conducted by our team from April 29 to May 5, 2026, 158 survey respondents identified service frequency as the most significant issue (81%), followed by a lack of adequate routes (39%). A smaller share of respondents cited inconvenient locations (18%), lack of safety (10%), and other issues (21%). The majority of respondents were students who used RIPTA more than six times since June of 2025, since it was free for them as Brown University students. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the survey findings.

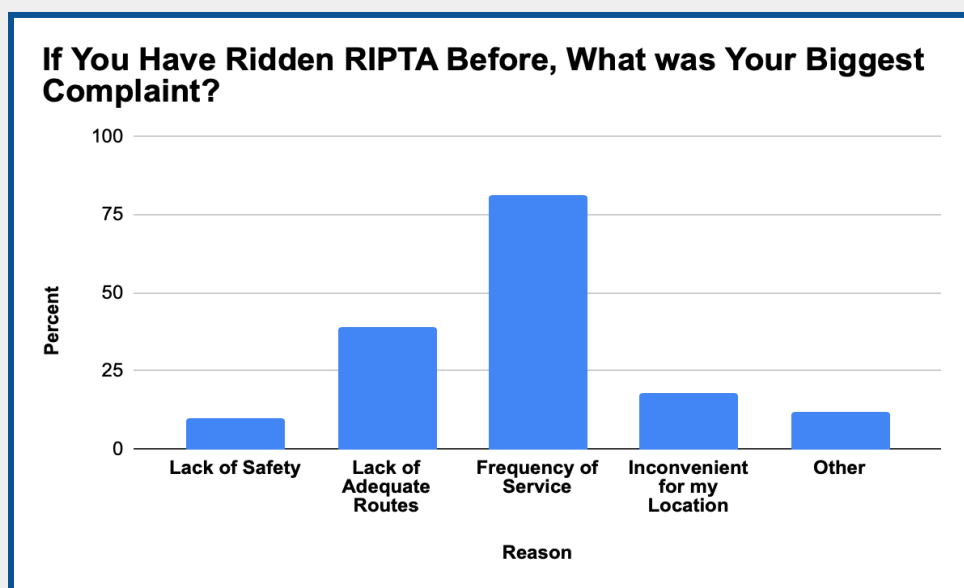
Figure 2: Frequency of Travel on RIPTA Within the Brown University Community



³ Ocean State Media. (2026, January 8). RIPTA budget cuts tied to sharp ridership drop, advocates say. <https://www.oceanstatemedia.org/transportation/ripta-budget-cuts-tied-to-sharp-ridership-drop-advocates-say>

⁴ Rhode Island Public Transit Authority. (n.d.). Facts & Figures. <https://www.ripta.com/node/6>

Figure 3: Biggest Complaints about RIPTA Within the Brown University Community



III. The Policy Environment

State officials in Rhode Island ultimately decide what RIPTA can and cannot do. As a quasi-public agency, RIPTA collects revenue that is directly generated (47.1%), but gets about half its funding from the federal government (36.9%), state government (12.4%) and local government (7%).⁵ For capital projects, funding is gathered through federal funding (80%) and from direct revenue (20%). Because the Governor and the State Legislature must approve the budget each year, funding decisions are always political.

This creates real uncertainty. Every year, RIPTA has to compete with other state priorities for limited resources, and those priorities can shift depending on who's in charge. Fare revenue helps, but it's nowhere near enough to cover operations on its own. That leaves the agency vulnerable whenever state funding gets tight or changes direction.

RIPTA also operates within a broader network of stakeholders. The Save RIPTA Coalition has done a good job building public support through its reports, and rider concerns about reliability, safety, and accessibility continue to influence elected officials. On the federal side, programs like Section 5307 and 5311 offer real money that RIPTA hasn't fully used yet. The issue is that moving or accessing those funds is subject to strict federal rules, including Title VI equity requirements, which can slow progress and limit how quickly changes can be made.

If the state provided RIPTA with more stable funding, the benefits would extend well beyond transit. Reliable service helps people reach jobs and education, supports local businesses, and advances the state's environmental and economic goals. At the same time, additional money alone will not solve every problem. The agency still needs to improve how it operates day to day.

⁵ RIPTA, "2024 Annual Agency Profile - Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (NTD ID 10001)," Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, 2024, https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2024/10001.pdf

Several factors currently work in RIPTA’s favor. The Save RIPTA Coalition continues to generate political momentum, and the 2025 Operational Efficiency Study shows that RIPTA already runs efficiently, spending \$101 per capita compared to the \$123 peer average.⁶ Federal formula funds remain available for reallocation. However, there are still real obstacles. State accounting systems move slowly, federal compliance rules are strict, and the lack of an indexed gas tax leaves the agency without a stable, long-term revenue source.

These conditions explain why the Reliability and Restoration Action Plan focuses on what RIPTA can actually control right now: using the legal authority it already has under Title 39, shifting around federal dollars that are already available, and building stronger partnerships instead of waiting for big new funding.

IV. How We Turn the RIPTA Bus Around

The “Reliability and Restoration Action Plan” is a four-pronged strategy centered on: **1) Safety;** **2) Workforce Stability;** **3) Increased Service;** and **4) Strategic Partnerships.** It seeks to directly confront the ongoing “death spiral” of declining ridership and weakening service quality, transforming RIPTA into a dependable transit system that Rhode Islanders can trust.

First, the plan prioritizes safety through a Community-Based Safety Ambassador Program in partnership with RIDOC and the Judiciary. Individuals with minor traffic violations, such as speeding or traffic tickets, would have the option to complete community service hours by serving as trained Safety Ambassadors.

The Safety Ambassadors would be trained and deployed across the transit system to strengthen on-the-ground presence, assisting with onboarding and offboarding, de-escalating conflicts, and supporting older and disabled riders. The program is designed to serve a dual purpose in terms of promoting the rehabilitation for individuals with traffic violations while also strengthening community engagement and transit safety. Improved safety would be measured by the number of ambassadors deployed, as well as improvement in drivers’ and passengers’ safety perceptions while using RIPTA.

Second, it restores workforce stability by redesigning operators' schedules to reduce burnout and improve working conditions. This includes modernizing human resource systems and operator schedules to ensure adequate breaks during shifts, as well as investing in infrastructure improvements, such as upgraded, accessible rest facilities. To support the implementation of workforce improvements, educational partnerships would be established with a dedicated operational commission responsible for recommending, implementing, and tracking outcomes. Workforce stability would be measured by revised schedules, job satisfaction, and improved employee retention.

Third, the plan expands service and accessibility by utilizing data analytics to identify first-and last-mile gaps and deploy smaller-capacity vehicles to areas with the greatest demand, while also creating mobility hubs at key stations.

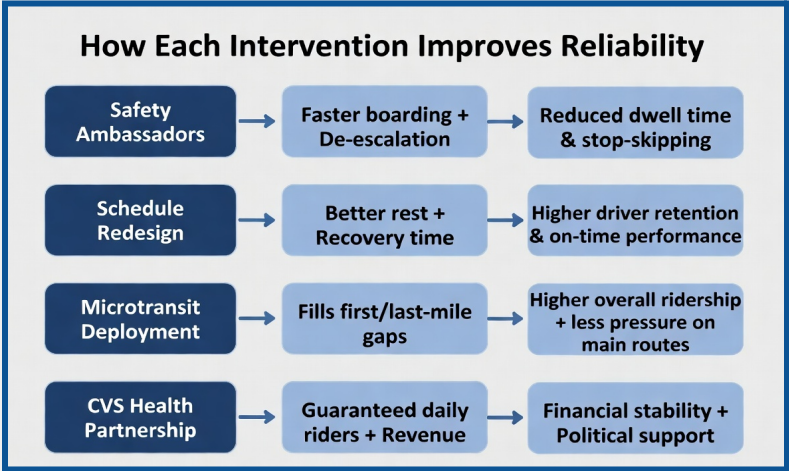


Figure 4: Linkages Between Interventions and Reliability Outcomes

⁶ Rhode Island Public Transit Authority. (2025). Operational efficiency study. https://www.ripta.com/sites/default/files/2025-11/RIPTA_Operational_Efficiency_Study_FINAL.pdf

This goal would be accomplished through data analytics, planning capacity, and stronger municipal partnerships. Increased service would be measured by new service areas and the number of new micro-vehicles deployed.

Fourth, the plan builds strategic partnerships with major employers, such as CVS Health, to launch a “Ride Free with RIPTA” program. This entails planning, developing, and advertising contract-based opportunities allowing participating employers to provide fare-free RIPTA access to their employees. This partnership would increase commuter ridership, reduce transportation barriers, and strengthen public-private collaboration. Strategic partnerships would be measured by the number of contracts secured with private employers and the amount of funding generated through these partnerships.

V. The How-to Dimensions

RIPTA already possesses the legal foundation and operational relationships necessary for implementation. The central challenge is to align five practical dimensions of capacity so that the Reliability and Restoration Action Plan is executed rather than remaining aspirational. These dimensions are drawn directly from the policy field analysis, the Logic Model, and the detailed budget work completed for the CVS Health Letter of Intent.

Financial Resources

The plan does not require new state appropriations. It requires only a targeted, modest investment that the agency can address through reallocation of existing funds. The six-month Safety Ambassador pilot that anchors the initiative is budgeted at \$150,000⁷, with RIPTA contributing \$45,000 in staff time and facilities. This leaves \$102,960 for six ambassadors, paid at the 2026 prevailing wage of \$22 per hour for 30 hours per week, plus \$25,000 for the 40-hour de-escalation curriculum, \$12,600 for radios, tablets, and uniforms, and \$9,440 for data tracking.⁸ These costs align with the Logic Model’s “Resources” column and can be funded through the reallocation of underutilized FTA formula funds (Sections 5307, 5311, and JARC), supplemented by discounted bulk fares from CVS Health and other employers under the “Ride Free with RIPTA” contracts. Microtransit vans and driver rest-area upgrades follow the same funding model: capital-linked federal dollars supplemented by municipal contributions. The net result is new service capacity that begins closing the \$32.6 million structural gap without requiring additional action from the General Assembly.

Figure 5:
Budget Availability for Safety Ambassador Program



Authorities & Rules

Authority is not the obstacle; it is the enabling framework. Title 39 of the Rhode Island General Laws already establishes RIPTA as a “body corporate and politic” and grants the Board of Directors and the CEO explicit authority to

⁷ Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). (n.d.). *National de-escalation training network*. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://copstrainingportal.org/in-person/cops-national-de-escalation-training-network/>

⁸ Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training. (2025, December). *Prevailing bus driver w/CDL, bus driver w/o CDL (van drivers), and bus aide rates: Effective January 1, 2026*. <https://dlt.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur571/files/2025-12/FINAL%20Prevailing%20Bus%20Driver%20Rate%20Schedule.pdf>

manage daily operations, re-engineer internal processes, hire staff, and execute contracts. No new legislation is required. The nine-member Board, chaired by the RIDOT Director, can approve the memorandum of understanding with the Department of Corrections for the Ambassador program, and the employer passes agreements with CVS Health in a single meeting. The primary requirements are standard FTA Title VI equity reviews and ordinary procurement rules, both of which RIPTA already satisfies routinely. The legal framework is in place; what has been missing is the operational decision to proceed.

Managerial Oversight & Accountability

Accountability must be embedded from the outset rather than added as an afterthought. The existing Data Governance Working Group will maintain a weekly dashboard tracking the metrics that matter most: the current 70 percent stop-bypass rate, on-time performance (target above 80 percent), ridership recovery on affected routes, driver retention, and the number of ambassadors deployed. Real-time boarding and incident data will be shared directly with CVS Health, enabling the company to monitor employee on-time arrivals. Quarterly reviews tied to the Logic Model outputs will enable timely adjustments before small problems escalate. This is not additional bureaucracy; it is the minimum level of transparency required to ensure accountability and demonstrate the pilot's effectiveness.

Human Know-How (Capacity via Expertise)

Most transit agencies fail in this area because they treat workforce issues as an afterthought. RIPTA has already demonstrated the capacity to run a CDL Permit Prep Program, with 35 graduates last year.⁷ The next step is to institutionalize this program and pair it with the schedule redesign that guarantees drivers adequate recovery time between shifts and upgraded rest facilities. Simultaneously, the Ambassador program requires a steady pipeline of justice-involved candidates who clear RIDOC screening and complete the 40-hour customer service and de-escalation training modeled on DOJ COPS standards.⁷ Adding two or three specialized grants-management and data-analysis positions will enable the agency to reallocate federal funds efficiently without creating new bottlenecks. While not glamorous, these positions represent precisely the skills the 2025 Operational Efficiency Study identified as currently missing at RIPTA.⁶

 Partnership Governance Structure		
Initiative	Lead Agency (Decision Maker)	Supporting Partner (Implementation)
Safety Ambassador Deployment	RIPTA Operations	Dept. of Corrections (RIDOC)
Ambassador De-escalation Training	Providence Police Dept.	RIPTA Operations
Microtransit Expansion	RIPTA Planning	Local Municipalities
Employer Bulk-Pass Contract	CVS Health HR	RIPTA Finance Dept.

Table 1: Partnership Governance Structure

Collaboration (Capacity via Buy-in)

Cross-sector collaboration is the foundation that holds the entire plan together. Contracting the Ambassador function represents a logical extension of RIPTA's existing practice of outsourcing significant portions of its operations. To manage political and union risks, the plan includes early and sustained engagement with ATU Local 618 and LiUNA Local 808. Formal memoranda of understanding will be executed with the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) for the Ambassador pipeline and with CVS Health for the bulk-pass program.

Municipalities will receive the microtransit hubs they have long requested, while RIDOT gains improved first- and last-mile connectivity. CVS Health obtains the workforce reliability its Healthy 2030 goals require. Decision-making authority will stay with RIPTA on operational matters. To keep everyone on the same page and handle any disagreements, the plan includes quarterly coordination meetings with all partners. This structure transforms external stakeholders from constraints into active co-implementers.

Taken together, these five dimensions show that RIPTA already has most of what it needs to succeed. The funding, legal authority, performance data, training pipelines, and key partnerships are already in place. What remains is disciplined execution turning these existing assets into restored service, safer buses, and a transit system Rhode Islanders can once again rely upon.

VI. Feasible Next Steps

To operationalize the strategy outlined above, the following phased implementation plan sequences interventions based on feasibility, funding availability, and administrative constraints.

To systematically mitigate the fiscal cliff and put this plan into action, the RIPTA executive team must execute the following phased actions over the next 12 months:

- Early phases prioritize actions that can be implemented within existing federal allocations and internal operational authority.
- Later phases introduce more resource-intensive or partnership-focused initiatives as coordination capacity and external agreements develop.

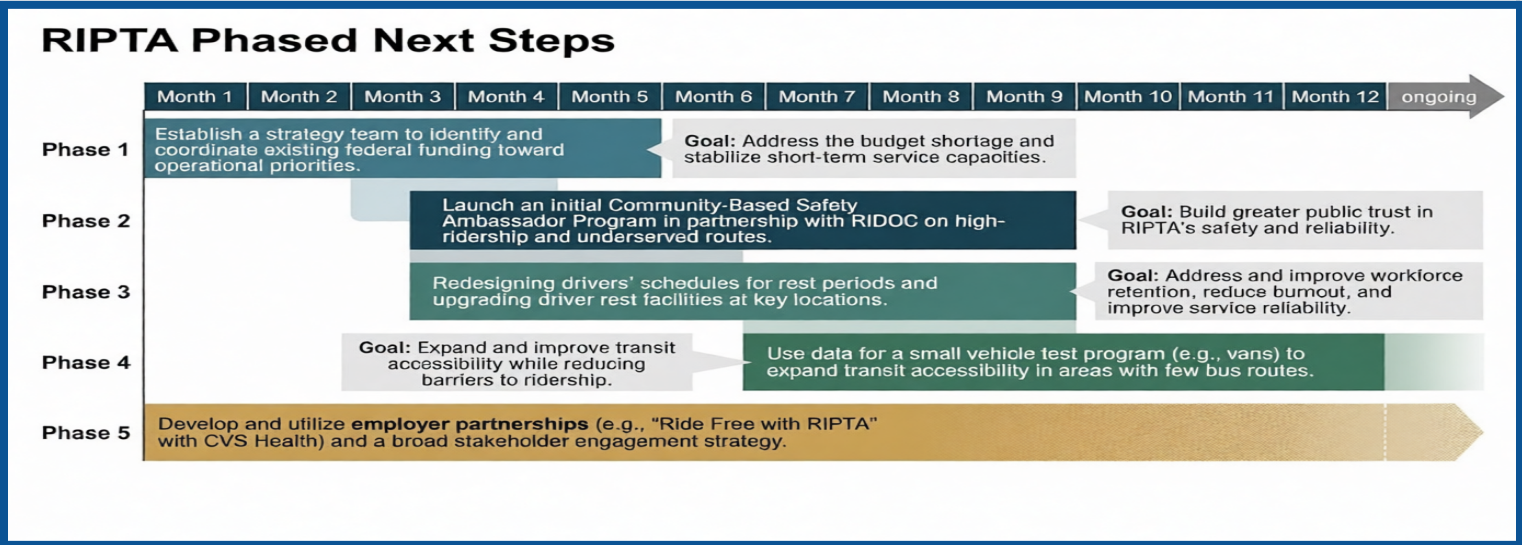


Figure 6: RIPTA Phased Next Steps (12-Month Implementation Timeline)

VII. Conclusion

Rhode Island’s public transit system is at a critical juncture. As explained in the Problem Statement, the agency began Fiscal Year 2026 with a \$32.6 million structural deficit. Even after the state provided a \$15 million appropriation, RIPTA was still left with about a \$10 million shortfall. The result was the largest service cuts in the agency’s history:

45 of 63 routes were affected, and the stop-bypass rate reached 70 percent. These changes have eroded rider trust and put significant pressure on drivers and staff.

The Reliability and Restoration Action Plan, outlined in Section IV, provides RIPTA with a practical path forward. It does four main things: it launches a Community-Based Safety Ambassador Program with RIDOC and the Judiciary to help manage crowds and speed boarding; it redesigns driver schedules and improves rest facilities to help prevent operator burnout; it introduces microtransit vans to address first- and last-mile challenges; and it establishes a bulk-pass agreement with CVS Health to generate steady revenue.

As covered in the How-to Dimensions section, making this work will require effort across five areas: funding, legal authority under Title 39, sound management, skilled personnel, and strong partnerships. Much of what's needed is already in place, but it won't be easy. The plan will need to navigate political pushback, union concerns, and strict federal rules. Success will depend on staying organized and working effectively with different groups.

If RIPTA follows through, this plan can help get service back on track, rebuild rider confidence, and put the agency in a much better position moving forward.

The time to act is now.

Endnotes

1. **Providence Streets Coalition. (2026, January).** *2025 service cuts impact report: Assessing the crisis in Rhode Island transit.* https://pvdstreets.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Service-Impacts-Report_package.pdf
2. **Shea, C. (2025, December 17).** *RIPTA once again counts on Gov. McKee to fill its budget gap.* Rhode Island Current. <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2025/12/17/ripta-once-again-counts-on-gov-mckee-to-fill-its-budget-gap/>
3. **Ocean State Media. (2026, January 8).** RIPTA budget cuts tied to sharp ridership drop, advocates say. <https://www.oceanstatemedia.org/transportation/ripta-budget-cuts-tied-to-sharp-ridership-drop-advocates-say>
4. **Rhode Island Public Transit Authority. (n.d.).** Facts & Figures. <https://www.ripta.com/node/6>
5. RIPTA, “2024 Annual Agency Profile - Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (NTD ID 10001),” Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, 2024, https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/transit_agency_profile_doc/2024/10001.pdf
6. **Rhode Island Public Transit Authority. (2025).** Operational efficiency study. https://www.ripta.com/sites/default/files/2025-11/RIPTA_Operational_Efficiency_Study_FINAL.pdf
7. **Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS). (n.d.).** *National de-escalation training network.* U.S. Department of Justice. <https://copstrainingportal.org/in-person/cops-national-de-escalation-training-network/>
8. **Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training. (2025, December).** *Prevailing bus driver w/CDL, bus driver w/o CDL (van drivers), and bus aide rates: Effective January 1, 2026.* <https://dlt.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur571/files/2025-12/FINAL%20Prevailing%20Bus%20Driver%20Rate%20Schedule.pdf>
9. **CVS Health. (2026).** *Healthy 2030: 2025 Impact Report.* <https://www.cvshealth.com/impact.html>

Appendix I: Artificial Intelligence (AI) Statement

This assignment has been created without the assistance of AI tools.

Appendix II: Statement of Contributions

Ryan: Contributed by attending group meetings and collaborating with team members for the management plan, developed the RIPTA survey referenced in this plan and circulated it among students and members of the Brown University community, produced charts/graphics referenced in this plan, and was responsible for writing the Executive Summary and parts of the Policy Environment Section.

Carlos: Contributed by attending group meetings and collaborating with team members for the management plan, was responsible for contributing to the Policy Environment Section; was in charge of the Next Feasible Steps section; was in charge of creating a visual template for the Management Plan; was the Project Lead for the project.

Nathalia: Contributed by attending group meetings and collaborating with team members for the management plan, helped disseminate the RIPTA survey and increase response rate referenced in this plan, included RIPTA survey data references in the plan, and was responsible for writing, revising, and applying feedback received to the problem statement and policy response sections.

Areeb: Participated in group meetings and collaborated with team members on the management plan. Developed visual graphics for the project, revised the document throughout, and took primary responsibility for enhancing the How-To Dimensions section, Conclusion section, and Endnotes/Footnotes.