

Free transit passes improve the curb appeal of taking the bus



BACKGROUND

This case study documents how TCC has transformed Ontario residents' relationship with taking the bus, making it easier and cheaper. For transit converts, like Jocelyn Andrade, the passes have reduced reliance on pricey ride-hailing apps and freed up funds for other basic needs, such as food and clothing. For dedicated transit riders, like Miki Iannetta, the passes have simply made taking the bus more affordable and enjoyable. For more about Ontario Together's transportation work, see page 65.

Interviews for this case study were conducted in September 2022.

A bus in the Omnitrans fleet that residents can take using the free transit passes. Photo credit: Omnitrans

JOCELYN ANDRADE has called Ontario home for nearly 20 years. Until recently, she lived with her parents to make ends meet. Then, in 2021, she was selected among over 3,000 applicants in a lottery for an income-based rental unit at Vista Verde Apartments, a TCC-funded affordable housing complex in the Ontario Together project area. The housing opportunity also comes with three years of free transit passes for the entire Omnitrans system, which serves the San Bernardino Valley region.

For Andrade and her 18-month-old daughter, the free transit passes were a welcome surprise. Andrade discovered the opportunity to get free bus passes through flyers posted throughout the Vista Verde apartment complex. At the time, Andrade relied primarily on family members to drive her to work — and when her family members were too busy, she would pay for ride-hailing services. Although

“As a single mom who is struggling financially, there’s times where I need to get to from point A to point B, and this program is a good help to get around. It brings me a lot of ease.”

JOCELYN ANDRADE

she owns a car, it is not reliable, as she struggles to pay for insurance and maintenance.

The financial savings of free transit have been very helpful for Andrade. She estimates that taking the bus saves her \$60 to \$80 per week, which could add up to more than \$300 in a month.

Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, Andrade took every possible opportunity to save money, and the travel passes were very helpful. “I wasn’t working for like a month, so I wasn’t claiming any income. And then after we came back, my hours were cut.”

Andrade was not new to public transportation, having ridden the bus regularly as a college student. But the transit passes and transit training program have increased her confidence in taking the bus, even with the logistical challenges associated with traveling with a baby. She now also has an easier time running essential errands, such as picking up prescriptions and going grocery shopping.

Being able to take the bus for free has also given Andrade a chance to relax on her commute and observe the world

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“With the travel passes, I save a lot of money, and it’s very convenient. I can use the money I save to buy little things for my daughter, like new clothes or shoes.”

JOCELYN ANDRADE

Jocelyn Andrade outside the Vista Verde Apartments, located along Omnitrans Route 61. Photo credit: Luskin Center for Innovation

around her, rather than focusing on driving. Sometimes, she brings her daughter along, and they spend the time connecting with each other and with other riders on the bus.

“When I’m on the bus, I talk to my daughter. We look out

the window, and I tell her, ‘Oh, you see that? You see this?’ And she’s getting very social — other people might say ‘hi’ or want to interact with her, and that’s how we end up starting conversations and meeting new people.”

MIKI IANNETTA moved to Ontario from Argentina 10 years ago, and she has been an active member of the community ever since. Early in her time in the city, she got involved by volunteering at the local library. Eventually, this work became a full-time job. Seven years later, Iannetta still works at the Ontario library as a clerk and front desk receptionist.

To get to and from work, Iannetta has always been a loyal transit rider. She does not have a driver’s license, and even before obtaining a free bus pass through Ontario Together, she took the bus to work each day. For her, the benefits of the free transit pass program have been financial savings.

“The passes have been a great amenity. In the past I had to worry about buying individual tickets each time I rode the bus. Now I can just hop on and not have to think about it.”

MIKI IANNETTA

“I have been able to save about \$50 in a month,” she said. She was able to use the extra savings to buy additional groceries.

She also noted that having a transit pass has eliminated the need to purchase individual fares for each ride, making it easier to board the bus. Before, she sometimes worried about not having WiFi to purchase a pass before riding, but now, she can board with ease. “It gives me peace of mind knowing it will always work, and I don’t have to worry about paying,” she said.

“With prices for gas and food so high, I’ve been recommending the program to others in the community. From what I hear, I know that the passes have helped many people access another option for transportation.”

MIKI IANNETTA