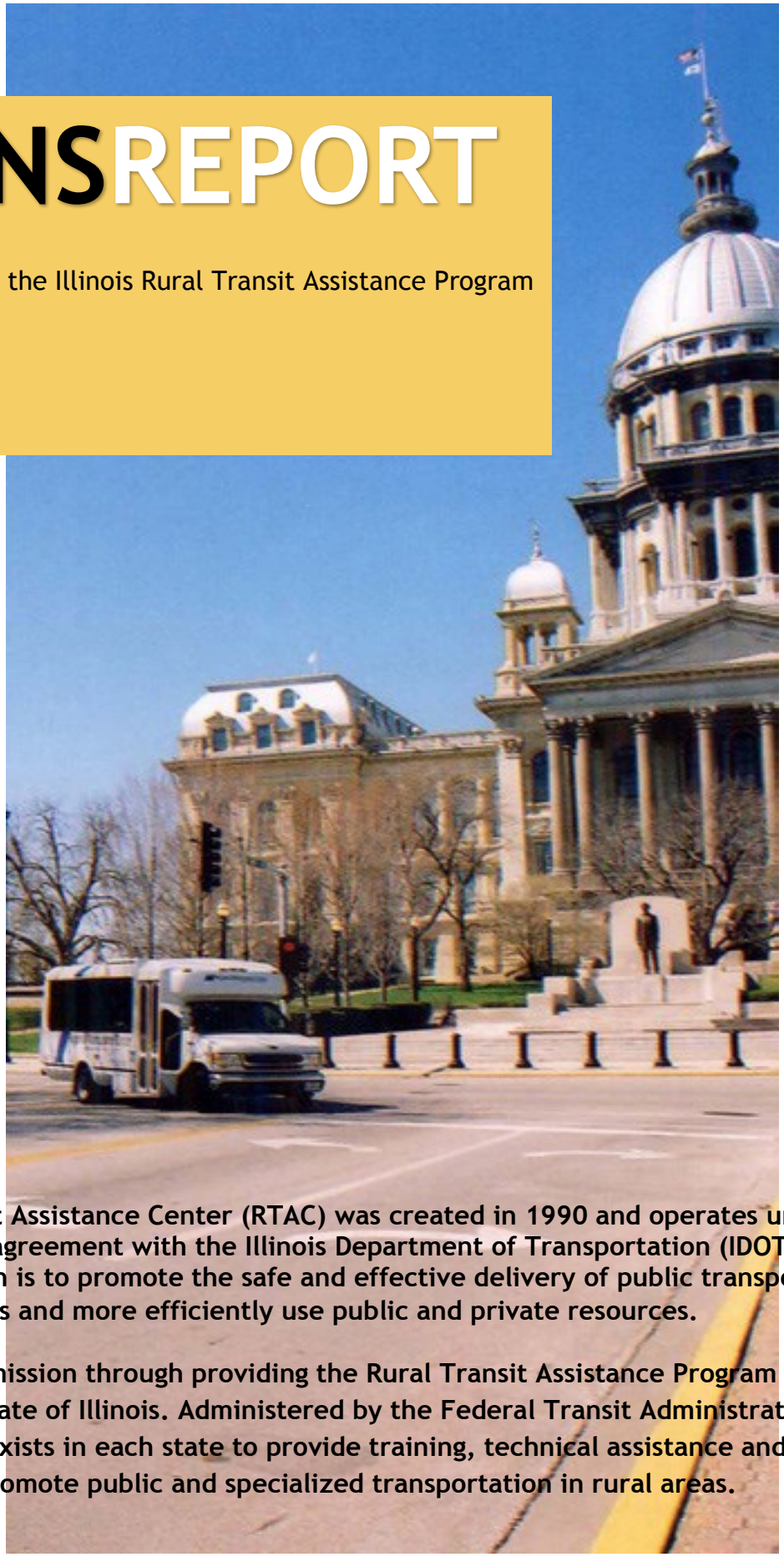
TRANSREPORT

The Newsletter of the Illinois Rural Transit Assistance Program

Spring, 2020



RTAC Staff:

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The Rural Transit Assistance Center (RTAC) was created in 1990 and operates under an inter-agency agreement with the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT). The RTAC mission is to promote the safe and effective delivery of public transportation in rural areas and more efficiently use public and private resources.

RTAC fulfills its mission through providing the Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) for the State of Illinois. Administered by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), an RTAP exists in each state to provide training, technical assistance and research, and to promote public and specialized transportation in rural areas.

RTAC Notes

Dave Patton, Director

Many things come to mind as I sit to write this. I asked myself "where are we now?" I answered myself, basically, that "we are all in the same place where we were. We are sort of treading water, or maybe even treading quicksand hoping that something major will change soon. And anticipating that changes are coming which will be different in a way we cannot yet determine." Seemingly everything in the news is related somehow to society's existence since the discovery of COVID-19. Probably, if you are like me, you are kind of tired of hearing about it and reading about it. But the subject will not be leaving any time soon. For one thing, our future selves will refer to this time as the "COVID-19 episode" and hopefully that will be what it is: a singular event. There is a good chance, though, that this will be another flu-like sickness that makes its way around the world and back every year in slightly different forms, for which we will need to be inoculated. But life will go on, as will transit. Some of the interesting things I have observed or learned as we cope with this situation follow.

- It is stunning how the Federal government found so much money in so little time. Trillions of dollars now seem like a pedestrian figure – it's the "new billion." And companies, governments, utilities, and indeed transit funding bodies have also attempted to help absorb the financial hit society is taking, by forgiving payments, reducing premiums, cancelling fare collection, etc. In the public transit world will it be possible that FTA could continue with reduced local match requirements in some of its transit programs, like Sections 5311 and 5307?
- Technology is plainly evident when it comes to communications, the Internet, and software tools. Being forced to learn and utilize new software and tools is sometimes more effective than simply choosing to use them when things are normal. It is apparent to me that many in-person meetings, or gatherings, while preferable in many cases, are not necessary in order to accomplish tasks. I have to think that some travel and meeting costs in the future will be reduced thanks to a new reliance on proven and improved technology. All of the video conferencing systems really work well.
- In addition to amazing technology improvements, we are also seeing big changes in services provided by many businesses and governments. Think of grocery stores, doctor's offices, restaurants--any businesses which normally relied upon in-person visits. Now, many people who used to ride the bus and are now staying in place, can access shopping and delivery services from grocery stores, for example. I have heard of doctors who are going back to making house calls. Just about anything can be delivered thanks to Internet shopping and all the delivery companies. Even transit providers have adapted to delivering food from stores and meals from social services agencies. Of course one of the problems with this "new scenario" in which we find ourselves, is not actually new, but the truth many people who rely upon rural public transit are not as adept with online tools or services – if they even have it available.

RTAC Notes Continued

- This COVID-19 experience will prove to be a valuable experience in planning for a pandemic or other catastrophic event which causes severe disruptions to business. Look for expanded business continuity planning to be a common topic in transit training in the future. Will transit agencies ever be able to remove any of the physical mitigation tools, like Plexiglas driver partitions?
- People do indeed come together in times of need or stress, including in all parts of rural transit operations. Federal and state agencies have quickly developed and adapted new plans to help transit agencies continue to operate. While not "looking the other way" IDOT and others are doing their best to expedite work and allow for extensions for filing applications that are for new and old programs. Transit agencies are helping each other and sharing what they have learned. ϴ

Piattran's COVID-19 Work — In the News

The *Piatt County Journal Republican* carried a nice story explaining the work done by Piattran to keep service running where needed. The story includes quotes from Piattran's Director Jami Trybom and comments from members of the Piatt County Board Transportation Committee.

Read the story here.

IPTA Notes

Laura Calderon, Executive Director

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented communities across the country with challenges none of us could have ever predicted we would face in our lifetimes. The public transportation industry has been hit particularly hard on so many levels.

Public transportation agencies in Illinois have been struggling to continue providing service in the face of severely reduced revenues. Most suspended fare collection to decrease operator and passenger interaction, and as social distancing guidelines were mandated, ridership plummeted and service contracts were cancelled. By mid-April, ridership in downstate Illinois was down by approximately 65%. Since early March, agencies have also experienced increased costs associated with disinfection of vehicles, bus stops, transfer stations and facilities.

Additionally, the impact on the transit workforce has been significant. For several weeks, PPE was scarce. Accessing the necessary tools to keep drivers and passengers safe proved difficult, if not impossible for some time. The impact may have been even more significant for rural transit agencies because of the nature of their operator positions. Many of their drivers are part-time and pay is often low. As a result, rural public transportation operators tend to be older, and in the group of the population that is at greatest risk for complications if they contract COVID-19. Many agencies saw drivers opting to stay home with little or no notice because of their fear of becoming infected.

But overwhelmingly, transit operators chose to continue working despite the risks involved. In the face of all of the setbacks, transit agencies both small and large alike have kept their doors open, the vehicles clean and running to continue providing essential work, medical and shopping trips in their communities.

Transit frontline workers are truly among the heroes that have emerged during this global crisis.

Transit agency heads were often faced with decisions about whether or not they could continue operating at all or if they should shut down service all together. But what we are seeing is agencies come up with innovative solutions and ways to be of even greater service to their communities. Management is using the down-time that some of their operators have while they have reduced ridership to pro-vide additional training opportunities, in an effort to keep their workforce sharp and armed with the latest information.

The staff at CRIS MTD takes a socially distant picture.

IPTA Notes Continued

In many communities across Illinois, transit systems are also providing grocery, meal and prescription delivery to those unable to leave their homes to access food and necessary medication. The response by the public transportation industry to this truly unexpected crisis has been incredible. Employees at all levels should be saluted, thank you hardly seems sufficient! Keep up the great work and know that you are all appreciated!

MTD drivers are essential. Shown below is Augustus "Gus" White from MTD, Champaign.

Illinois Rural Transit
ANNOUNCEMENTS

Jeffrey Drake is the operations manager for Rides Mass Transit District. He joined the RMTD team as a public relations and marketing coordinator in 2016 and has been in the role of operations manager for nearly one year.

He says his time in the public relations department helped give him a better understanding of how public transportation works and what a positive impact it can have throughout the local communities.

The Harrisburg native graduated from Bradley University in Peoria with a degree in communications.

Prior to his time in the transportation industry, Drake spent several years as a news and sports director at local radio stations in southern Illinois. He enjoys watching sports and spending time with his wife, Hannah, who is a high school band and theater director, and their bulldog. Θ

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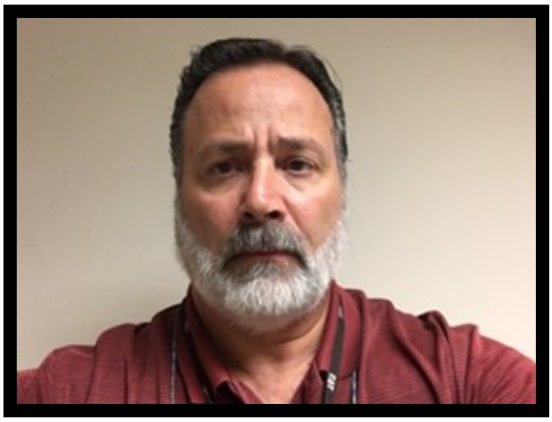

Kevin Knoblauch is the new Operations Manager for the North Central Area Transit System in Ottawa, IL. Kevin is married to Patty and they have three boys and seven grandchildren. He retired from Caterpillar after 35 years and started driving part time for NCAT in February 2017. In his free time Kevin enjoys woodworking and fishing. ϴ

RTAC FYI

RTAC has created a peer-to-peer email communications list. Members can ask any question on any topic pertaining to the operation of rural public transportation by sending an email to one address which will be seen by everyone on the list. If anyone on the list knows the answer, or who might offer a suggestion, the reply will go to all. Generally if one person has a question, there are others who have the same question or issue, or need the same advice. Many can benefit from an answer or discussion using this email list. Contact Dave Patton at dc-patton@wiu.edu if you would like more information. ϴ

Illinois Rural Transit
ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mackenzie Thiessen joined IDOT as the Bureau Chief of Transit Operations in March of this year. As Bureau Chief, he supports the work of a team of transit experts located in IDOT's Chicago and Springfield offices overseeing the State's DOAP, 5311, and Human Service Transportation programs, to name a few.

Before joining IDOT, Mackenzie served as the Director of Community Living for the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging, and as a Transportation Program Specialist with FTA's Office of Research, Demonstration and Innovation.

He earned a master's in public administration and recently completed his Doctorate in Management.

Mackenzie will be relocating to Chicago later this year with his fiancée and two dogs, and looks forward to being closer to family dispersed throughout the Midwest. ϴ

Illinois Department of Transportation

COVID-19 FAQ Prepared by IDOT OIPI

Q&A COVID19

What we know

1 Does a shelter-in-place order allow operators to continue paying employees sent home as part of the adjusted operations plan for the agency?

Yes. Transit operators will be able to recoup personnel-related expenses in situations where staff were sent home as part of their adjusted operations plan. Conversations are ongoing regarding newly appropriated 5311 CARE Act monies, and IDOT will provide further detail as soon as we have it. 5307 grantees should be working with FTA directly to gain access to their CARES Act funding.

2 What respite is there for operators with staff needing additional sick time above what is currently authorized?

Under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, the US Department of Labor has issued guidance for employers and employees regarding paid leave and unearned time. For additional guidance, please visit the USDOL website - https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employee-paid-leave

Transit operators supporting their employees through the guidance and requirements outlined in this Act will be able to invoice for personnel related expenses.

3 Lost revenue due to ridership and waiving fare. What can be done about match and general expenses?

Substantial investment in 5307 and 5311 funds were made available under the CARES Act. These funds can be used for eligible operation expenses at up to 100% federal share, including those due to lost revenue. Understanding the full impact on fare revenues due to loss in ridership and waiving of fares is not immediately known. IPTA is working to capture these changes in ridership.

4 Can agencies use their Public Transit Accounts to pay for any unearned time off needed for staff as a result of the pandemic?

Transit operators can utilize pending CARES Act funds to cover their COVID19-related expense.

5 What is being done about unearned time off for staff whose situation does not warrant sick leave (suspension in service without additional eligible activities for staff do work on)?

Transit operators should review and follow guidance provided by the US Department of Labor for provisions of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act specific to rights of employees regarding paid leave - https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employee-paid-leave

In circumstances where time off is the result of reduced service, transit operators can charge this as an eligible expense against their CARES Act 5307/5311 funding.

6 It would be helpful to know what creative opportunities there are for providers to use staff for other eligible operating expenses. What counts as additional cleaning, training, etc.?

5307/5311 CARES Act funding provides broad interpretation of operational expenses transit operators can engage in responding to COVID19. IDOT encourages transit operators to take advantage of training opportunities for staff, especially those whose daily work schedules have been reduced due to cuts in service.

7 How can drivers be repurposed during this time when routes are being reduced/ suspended due to low ridership?

Most important at this time is ensuring transit operators are maintaining a clean/disinfected fleet and workspaces. Using drivers to help support enhanced cleaning efforts is an appropriate measure. Further, the circumstances as they are, warrant operators to find virtual training opportunities for all staff. IDOT will be working with industry partners in the coming weeks to help bolster and share training opportunities. Finally, some transit operators are already coming up with creative solutions to engage their staff in eligible activities for reimbursement. RTAC recently established the Illinois Rural Transportation email group. This is yet another way for leadership among your peer agencies to share ideas and suggestions for training and other opportunities. Please contact David Patton at dc-patton@wiu.edu for more information on the Illinois Rural Transportation email group.

8 Does the two week leave recently approved by the feds count as an eligible expense?

Yes. 5307/5311 funds made available under the CARES Act can be used to accommodate new US Department of Labor requirements as established under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.

9 It appears that there was a law that was passed that included paid leave for some workers. It stated that one of the qualifications was if a child was off of school, which almost all kids are. According to what we read, this new law will enable employees to use the emergency time before using their sick time.

For guidance on complying with federal labor laws, IDOT is directing questions to the US Department of Labor's website https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employee-paid-leave

10 How should we handle public meeting requirements?

Governor Pritzker issued Executive Order 2020-07 on March 16th. Under this Order, provisions of the Open Meetings Act regarding in-person attendance of formal members and limiting of remote participation are suspended. When possible, the Order encourages public meetings and business to be postponed. When a meeting is necessary, remote options such as video, audio and/or telephonic access should be utilized, and efforts made to ensure the general public can participate.

After a resolution is passed in accordance with a board meeting held pursuant to EO 2020-07, IDOT advises the Chairperson (authorized approver) to forward the resolution via email, signed if possible. Further instruction on how to digitally deliver such resolution can be shared upon request.

11 Do we have confirmation that the Governor views public transportation as an essential function, and will IDOT be sending out any formal notice of such?

Governor Pritzker issued Executive Order 2020-10 on March 20th. Under this Order, public transportation is listed as essential infrastructure. The Governor's Order is explicit on this matter, making any further notice from IDOT unnecessary that this time. Transit operators concerned with their employees being questioned by law enforcement while traveling to and from work may write special letters for their employees to carry with them on official agency letter head, referring to the Governor's Order.

12 Can the state help us gain access to N95 masks?

IDOT and IPTA have inquired about N95 mask supplies. There is a current shortage on masks, but there are online tutorials on making masks with HEPA filters that can be used as a secondary alternative until masks are available. CARES Act funding can cover the cost of materials, masks, and bus driver isolation efforts (plexiglass enclosures, etc.).

13 What will be considered allowable costs for those shutting down / restarting services?

FTA has indicated that an operator can use 5307 and 5311 CARES Act funding for any expense related to restarting service, if the suspension was as a result of the COVID19 pandemic.

14 Can or will the state reduce the 35% match for DOAP? With revenue loss/suspension it will be difficult to meet the necessary match to maintain current DOAP funding levels.

At this time, DOAP funds will continue to require a 35% match. For those using matching funds from revenue lost due to ridership/fare collection, CARES Act monies can be used to serve as match. For those whose revenue match includes other local funding streams negatively impacted due to COVID-19, IDOT will continue to monitor the situation moving forward.

15 What consideration has there been for how public transportation providers should be responding to operational needs in the coming months as certain vulnerable populations remain at significant risk, while other segments begin to return to "normal"?

Public transportation providers will need to prepare for a months-long shift in operational capacity and ridership forecasting. With this in mind, transportation providers should be considering how to best continue meeting their mission, with circumstances as they are, for a prolonged period of time.

16 What should we be doing about Q3 DOAP reports if our agencies have already begun implementing policies for personnel due to COVID19? Should we report it as a DOAP expense or hold somewhere else? For those waiving fees for rides. Should those losses be included in the regular Q3 requisition or held for the additional 5311 funding?

Any expenses related to COVID-19 response can be charged to your CARES Act apportionment. IDOT is encouraging operators to bill pandemic-related expenses directly to their CARES Act funding, as is the intent of the legislation. DOAP funds should be retained for generally planned expenses. Losses observed from waiving of transit fares should be reflected in the quarter in which they occurred. CARES Act funds are meant to offset expenses otherwise covered by lost revenue by providing a funding stream with no state or local match requirement.

17 For public transportation providers interested in purchasing protective shield coverings for their vehicle fleet (driver cab), where can more information be found on available vendors?

There are now numerous resources available online and through your colleagues for purchasing and installing protective shield coverings around the driver cab. CUTR and Florida DOT released an emergency response to COVID-19 document last week that goes into great detail on the options and ways public transportation providers can acquire the materials necessary to install shield coverings. IPTA has also shared and made similar information available. For the rural transit providers RTAC has set up an email exchange that supports a Q&A format which includes threads on COVID-19.

18 We have heard there may be FEMA funds available to apply for as a response support to COVID-19. What is IDOT's position with respect to how we should account on our DOAP quarterly reports for expenses and the corresponding FEMA funding?

So long as the expenses you seek to reimburse with a mixture of DOAP and FEMA dollars are eligible public transportation activities/services, there should not be a problem. Requirements remain in place for DOAP-funded expenses to be matched with other funds at 35%. Whether that is through locally generated revenue, 5307/5311 funds, or other federal funding sources is up to the grantee. IDOT wants to be sure to remind grantees that you cannot use federal funds to help match other federal funds. If a grantee secures FEMA funding and wants to use it as match for DOAP, IDOT will expect to see a quarterly report that reflects clear separation of expenses that were covered with separate federal matchings funds.

19 With everything going on, one of our local grocery stores was wondering if we could deliver groceries to the elderly shut-ins and disabled. I do not know if our grant(s) would approve of these trips.

On April 19th, FTA updated their guidance for Emergency Response and CARES Act funding to allow for operational expenses related to delivery services (groceries, meals, pharmaceutical prescriptions). Please refer to FTA's COVID-19 Frequently Asked Question page for additional information. 5307 and 5311 recipients are reminded that delivery services are NOT considered an eligible expense for their DOAP funding. Those operators deciding to engage in delivery services may cover these expenses with local or federal monies. IDOT recommends operators engaging in these incidental activities have a policy in place to appropriately track and report on these trips.

20 Does FTA plan to postpone any upcoming program oversight reviews or will they continue as scheduled?

From the FTA website: "FTA understands that the focus of our recipients is on addressing the critical challenges faced by their agencies and in their communities in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Accordingly, FTA has decided to postpone remaining fiscal year 2020 program oversight reviews (triennial, state management, etc.) until early in federal fiscal year 2021".

21 Can we have an extension on our Q3 deadline so we have extra time to figure out what funding we are using and the corresponding accounting questions?

When possible, rural transit operators should prioritize the use of CARES Act Funding to pay for eligible expenses related to their system's COVID-19 response. The federal guidance allows eligible expenses for COVID-19 response and relief to be charged starting on 1/20/2020. COVID-19 Actual expense should be recorded on a Q3 pay request for the CARES Act grant. In the event that expenses have already been charged to a regular 5311 grant, the grantee should record reversals of those expenses on their Q4 5311 report and record the expenses on the CARES Act Q4 report. The same reversals must be recorded in the DOAP program so that the expenses for 5311 and DOAP remain parallel in reporting. In the Urban DOAP program, Expenses that have been incorrectly charged to NON-COVID-19 grants should be reversed in the 4th quarter and charged to the proper grant. As a reminder, the grant programs pay at the following rates:

5311 CARES Act reimburses expenses at 100%

DOAP reimburses at 65%

5311 Operating Expense is reimbursed at 50%

5311 Project Admin Expense is reimbursed at 80%

5307 CARES Act reimburses expenses at 100%

FEMA funds reimburse at 75%

It is imperative that the recipients and sub-recipients have the adequate fiscal responsibility to ensure that state and federal grants are not over-charged and that all required grant reports and audits are completed in a timely manner.

IDOT anticipates that lost state tax revenues will place a strain on transfers into the DOAP account in the coming months, and recipients should take available opportunities to prioritize the use of CARES Act funding. IDOT will extend the Q3 DOAP reporting deadline to May 28th for those grantees needing more time to sort through expenditures.

22 Any guidance if we will be able to charge off interest on funds needed for cash flow while we wait for these Cares funds instead of charging off now?

An operator may use CARES funding to cover interest on short-term lines of financing for cash flow needs. IDOT will accept this as an eligible operating expense for 5311 CARES funding.

23 Are operators allowed to use funding to offer hazard pay to employees and drivers still running routes/engaging with the public?

Compensation for personnel is a local decision. If a grantee/operator decides to offer hazard pay, this would be an eligible expense, so long as there is an approved policy in place for such circumstances. Θ

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