

# WeGo welcomes more passengers back after continuing to drive during pandemic



Bus operator Melissa Rice gets ready to leave the WeGo Central terminal in Nashville, Tenn., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Josie Norris / The Tennessean



Rice checks her mirrors before pulling out of the WeGo Central terminal in Nashville, Tenn., on Friday, July 16, 2021. Josie Norris

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WeGo bus operator Melissa Rice sometimes worked 10-hour days during the pandemic to get essential workers to their jobs. Her own job made her an essential worker, too.

“It was real scary at first. I just did what they told us to do,” Rice said. “Am I gonna give it to my mom? Am I gonna give it to my nephew? Am I gonna give it to my husband?”

Although the pandemic brought many business operations to a screeching halt, WeGo drivers like Rice never stopped serving the Nashville community. From 2019 to 2020, Nashville’s public transit agency lost about 2 million rides. Now that pandemic restrictions are lifting, many passengers who stopped using the service due to COVID-19 are returning for the first time.

Returning riders will find that WeGo has not only taken steps to make rides safe and sustainable, but has also made improvements to the bus system and offers opportunities for bus operators.

They’re finding the transit system makesome improvements and has others on the horizon as it focuses on its role as

Nashville native Sharon Berry has ridden the public bus system in Nashville for 20 years to get to her job as a private housekeeper. Berry kept riding during the pandemic and said WeGo drivers took many safety precautions, including requiring masks at all times. As someone who hasn’t driven a car for several years, Berry said she appreciates the reliability of the bus system.

“You can count on them,” Berry said. “They’ll get you there and they’ll show up.”

### Revamping system during pandemic

In the past year, WeGo improved 18 bus stops on Nolensville Pike and added 95 parking spots in the the WeGo Star Park and Ride at the commuter rail station in Mount Juliet.

WeGo also introduced the Murfreesboro Pike Transit Signal Priority, which optimizes timing at traffic lights to allow buses that are 2 or more minutes behind to get on schedule.

New transit centers in North Nashville and Hillsboro are planned, as well as WeGo Link, which will allow Antioch passengers to ride Uber and Mobility Solutions to bus stops for a lower price.

QuickTicket, a new app and reloadable card, will soon replace the paper ticket system. The cards will be available at select stores, including Walgreens.

### Supporting Nashvillians

Passenger Jackie Tracy said WeGo provides great accommodations for people

using wheelchairs. Tracy, formerly a construction worker in St. Louis, moved to Nashville in 2017 and has been using a wheelchair for the past two years. The buses, which offer ramps and straps to secure his wheelchair, help him get to the store and his doctor appointments.

“It’s really a reflection of the community,” WeGo spokeswoman Renuka Christoph said. “We want to be inclusive with everybody. That’s who we are at the end of the day... We want to give opportunity to everybody.”

Nicholas Oldham, now the senior safety manager, initially began at WeGo as a bus operator a few years ago. Originally from Nashville, Oldham earned an undergraduate degree in computer science from Tennessee State University and pursued an IT career in Arizona. He later moved to Atlanta and earned a master’s degree in theology. Oldham never planned to work as a bus operator, and only considered it after a former colleague started working at WeGo, frequently texting and calling Oldham to recommend the job.

At the time I was a director. I’m like, ‘Nah, I’ve got an office. I don’t want to go drive a bus,’” Oldham said. “But when I came, I realized, wow, there’s such value here and the ability to move up was apparent immediately.”

As an operator, Oldham said he loved the thrill of driving the bus through tight spaces and getting compliments from passengers.

“Passengers have the ability to know your name because we all wear badges, but your infamous name is ‘Bus Driver,’” Oldham said. “So, for a passenger to say, ‘Hey, bus driver, thanks for the ride,’ or, ‘That was a good ride, that was a smooth ride,’ that was the most fulfilling.”

Oldham was soon promoted to various training positions before securing a job as senior safety manager in March 2020. Only a few days into his new job, a tornado hit Nashville, and then the first case of COVID-19 appeared. Oldham had to adapt quickly.

Apart from protecting riders and drivers from the virus, Oldham addresses many other safety issues. A typical day involves taking pictures of and reporting overgrown trees or missing stop signs.

To encourage passengers to stay safe and return to riding on the bus, WeGo has launched a new social media campaign called #rollwithWeGo. Bus operators like Rice continue to reflect on the effects of the pandemic as they ensure the safety of their riders.

“It opened my eyes a lot because we did lose a driver, and some of our drivers lost family members,” Rice said. “It made me appreciate life more. It made me love my job more, and it made me love my customers more.... We’ve got to live one day at a time.”