



Intercity Bus Blues

PUBLIC OFFICIALS FAIL TO ACT AS THE THREAT OF CARRIERS BEING EVICTED FROM CHICAGO GREYHOUND TERMINAL GROWS & ILLINOIS'S BUS NETWORK WEAKENS

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By Joseph P. Schwieterman, Ph.D. and Ola Klimczak

The Illinois intercity bus system is on the verge of crisis due to Chicago Greyhound Station's potential closure within months and the deterioration of service across the state. This hurts low-income groups and thwarts Chicago's development into a premier bus/rail connecting hub.

This Chaddick Institute brief reviews problems facing Illinois's intercity bus system and builds upon our *Station on the Brink* [report](#) in May 2023. Our findings revolve around two broad conclusions:

-The City of Chicago has adopted a "do nothing" approach to the threat of bus companies being evicted from Chicago Greyhound Terminal after the lease ends in October. If the station is shuttered, much passenger hardship will result. Several months of planning will be needed to avoid a chaotic transition.

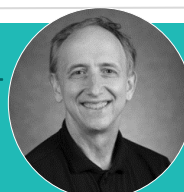
-The deterioration of the Illinois intercity bus system is due to the low priority given to it by the state government. Illinois's bus program lags behind all other Midwestern states. Prominent metro areas, including Bloomington–Normal, Decatur, and Peoria, lack direct bus service to Chicago's Central Area.

The problems are particularly harmful to disadvantaged groups, including unemployed and disabled residents and those without driver's licenses. They also reduce the synergy of Chicago's bus and rail services. The five major findings are presented below.

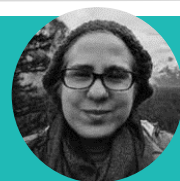


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PHOTO (ABOVE): CHICAGO GREYHOUND TERMINAL, APRIL 8, 2024



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These findings are based on a newly conducted data analysis, an evaluation of state bus programs nationwide, and stakeholder engagement.

FINDING 1. The eviction of Greyhound, FlixBus, Barons Bus, Burlington Trailways, and other lines from Chicago Greyhound Terminal could be only a few months away. The City of Chicago has yet to present a basic plan for preserving the facility for bus travel. Eviction could precipitate a crisis even greater than that in Philadelphia, where a Greyhound station closure has resulted in much disruption. Moving to a different location would likely result in much pushback from nearby residential populations.

Last year, the news that the Chicago Greyhound Terminal at 630 W. Harrison—of which Greyhound is the largest tenant—could soon be sold for development by its owner, Twenty Lakes Holdings, drew much attention.¹ By mid-2023, discussions between the City of Chicago staff, bus lines, elected officials, and Twenty Lakes raised hope that these parties were working toward a solution. An independent assessment of the facility’s real estate value was launched.

Yet, this was followed by inaction. City Hall appears to have shifted to a do-nothing approach, even as new warning signs appear. The shuttering of bus stations in Cleveland, OH, Houston, TX, Louisville, KY, and Philadelphia proves the eviction threat is real. The apparent efforts by Twenty Lakes to negotiate a sale in good faith have yet to result in systematic follow-up by public agencies. By the time Greyhound’s three-year lease ends in October, public agencies will have had ample time to strike a deal.



A family retrieves their luggage at Chicago’s Greyhound Station in April 2024.

Our analysis indicates that the station sees around 75 daily arrivals and departures, boosted by FlixBus’s relocation there last spring. Previously, FlixBus, whose parent company, FlixBus, purchased Greyhound in 2021, used a curb near Chicago Union Station. We estimate the 88,000-square-foot facility, which is appropriately sized for Chicago’s needs and relatively modern, serves more than 500,000 passengers annually. We anticipate [ridership will return to pre-pandemic](#) levels by 2026.

This station site, though, is situated in the rapidly redeveloping West Loop (and Old Post Office) neighborhoods, making it attractive for residential use. Recent analysis indicates there is space for as many as 1,100 residential units on the site and that it has a market value of around \$30 million.² Although this cost is not insignificant, it is manageable for a region as large as metropolitan Chicago. For example, \$21 million has been spent to enhance suburban Homewood’s Amtrak/Metra station.³ Some

(or perhaps much) of the cost of operating and maintaining the Greyhound Terminal could be paid by rental fees charged to bus companies. Exactly how much? That isn't clear, as the City has apparently not sought an answer. Another compelling reason for preserving the terminal is that moving to a different location would likely generate much neighborhood resistance, as the efforts in other cities have shown.⁴

Other prominent Chicago-area transportation actors, including the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the Cook County Department of Transportation, and the Regional Transportation Authority, mostly watch from a distance. The City of Chicago appears to have yet to ask them for assistance. This inaction is striking, considering that the federal government has grown more inclined to fund intercity bus projects since the start of this calendar year.⁵

Other cities are responding to station-closing threats with much greater urgency. Tampa's transit agency made alternative spaces available in response to the loss of their Greyhound stations. Los Angeles County's transit authority facilitated Greyhound's relocation to Los Angeles Union Station. The City of Atlanta and the State of Georgia created a new transit-friendly Greyhound station, which opened in 2023. Detroit is planning to build a combined intercity bus/Amtrak station. New York officials recently announced an ambitious Port Authority Bus Terminal overhaul. Boston's main bus station is being expanded.



A Van Galder/Coach USA Bus for Wisconsin on the “red lane” at Chicago Union Station in April 2024. No analysis has apparently been conducted about whether the lane could handle more intercity buses despite the soon-to-expire Greyhound Station lease.

FINDING 2. Even a rudimentary assessment of possible interim locations for bus arrivals and departures if the Greyhound Terminal is lost, such as spots near Union Station or under the Jane Addams Memorial Parkway, is yet to be presented. This assessment is urgently needed, considering several months would be required for an orderly transition. The “hope for the best” approach of City Hall and area planning agencies puts the mobility of low-income and disabled travelers at risk.

Why is Intercity Bus Service so Important? Why is Chicago's Terminal at Risk?

Greyhound, Burlington Trailways, and other lines serving Chicago are part of an interconnected system that allows passengers to travel between several thousand points on a single ticket. The system gives travelers a much wider set of origins and destinations from which to choose than airlines and rail providers, generally at lower costs, which makes bus travel important for millions of households, including those without private vehicles and those with low incomes or disabled members.¹² The Chicago Greyhound Terminal is one of 33 properties that Twenty Lakes, a real estate holding company, reportedly bought from FirstGroup, a U.K. firm unaffiliated with Greyhound, for a price of [\\$140 million](#) several years ago. See our [2023 Brief](#) for more details on the station's transportation role, a route map, and a review of the vulnerable populations it serves.

No systematic analysis appears to have been undertaken to find alternate locations for some—or all—of the station's service, such as:

- **Additional curb space on Jackson Boulevard next to Chicago Union Station (CUS).** This area, mainly a lane painted red on the street's south side, is currently used by the Amtrak Thruway bus service, including the Van Galder/Coach USA service to Rockford and Madison, WI. Several Greyhound buses also stop here after leaving the bus station to serve Amtrak, making connections to and from cities in Indiana, Kentucky, and other locations.
- **The CTA Bus Station and Clinton & Jackson Blvd.,** a spacious facility abutting CUS, is heavily used for staging transit buses but is not congested with passenger traffic, as most transit users tend to board and alight at nearby curbside stops. Our informal assessment indicates it has unused capacity even during rush hour. There are unique departure locations for many different bus lines. Whether several locations could be consolidated to allow for more intensive bus operations is worthy of formal evaluation.
- **Curb space and other areas under or near the Jane Addams Parkway on S. Des Plaines Street, adjacent to the current station.** Although likely not an acceptable long-term location due to its visually unappealing character, it could be an interim solution. This would likely require providing a large modular indoor waiting area with a ticket booth, signage, and restrooms.

Bus companies have expressed willingness to adjust their schedules to minimize time spent at stops near CUS to lessen the traffic impacts. Cleaning, staging, and refueling could also be conducted remotely to limit loading times to around 10 minutes per departure. In each case, arrangements for indoor waiting and restrooms must be worked out.

The potentially harsh consequences of the City's inaction are evident in Philadelphia, where the downtown Greyhound Station at 10th & Filbert was closed more quickly than many expected last year due to interest in a new professional basketball stadium on the site. Greyhound and other bus lines initially moved to a nearby downtown spot on Market Street with a small indoor space and ticket counter, where the buses made curbside stops. Many bus passengers were required to wait outside on a crowded sidewalk without protective cover, and complaints ensued. Parked coaches also created issues by taking up a bus lane used by transit buses. In December, the bus lines began making curbside stops at a new location that is less congested and has a small indoor space and restrooms. However, it is seen as only an interim location, and the lines may move again this autumn. These problems could have been avoided had the city followed through on its earlier plans to create an off-street bus station near the 30th Street (Amtrak) Station.

Finding 3. The station crisis is partly attributable to the low priority given to intercity bus travel by our state government, resulting in the Illinois network dramatically shrinking since 2017. Five of the ten most heavily traveled intrastate routes lack direct bus service. Downtown Chicago has lost its direct links to Bloomington–Normal, Decatur, East St. Louis, Freeport, Galena, Kankakee, Peoria, and the Dubuque (IA/IL) metro areas. No intercity bus or rail service whatsoever is available in Decatur, East St. Louis, Galena, and Freeport, and early this year, Chicago’s South Suburbs area lost the last of its bus service.

Our analysis indicates that the decline of Illinois’s travel network has been more severe than any other Midwestern state and most states nationwide due to a lack of planning, branding, and marketing of state-supported bus services. Whereas many state-managed systems, such as *Virginia Breeze*, Colorado’s *Bustang*, *Hoosier Ride*, and *Oregon POINT*, are enjoying considerable success, Illinois has done comparatively little to attract new riders and develop markets. While impressive, our state’s expansive state-supported Amtrak network can only partially compensate for this deficiency, and no new trains have been added to Downstate since 2006.

We conducted a schedule review drawing upon *Statewide Intercity Passenger Transportation in Illinois*, an analysis by the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois Chicago published in late 2022.⁶ This study ranks the state’s routes by passenger volume (with all modes of travel combined) based on population and geographic proximity. Using the UIC rankings, we found that five of the ten busiest routes and eight of the 20 busiest routes now lack a viable bus service (Table 2; see endnote for details and our definitions, which exclude airport shuttle services).⁷ Even when rail services are included, direct service is available on only seven of the ten busiest routes and only 11 of the 20 busiest routes. Among the most notable gaps in bus service:

- *Chicago–Kankakee*, ranking 2nd in traffic, lost its intercity bus connection earlier this year (see discussion in endnote 8).⁸
- *Chicago–Peoria*, ranking 3rd, has a train-bus connection, but waiting times at transfer points are generally one or three hours. All southbound trips take at least 5 hours and 5 minutes, whereas Greyhound previously covered the distance in three hours. An airport shuttle runs to O’Hare but does not stop in other parts of the city (see endnote 9).⁹
- *Bloomington–Normal–Chicago*, ranking 4th, has only a circuitous route via Rockford, which is 90 miles longer than the direct Amtrak and expressway route (see discussion below) due to Greyhound and Megabus both dropping service.
- *Chicago–Decatur*, ranking 7th, has no bus or train service. Greyhound passes through Decatur without a stop, partially due to the lack of governmental cooperation in providing a station. Remarkably, though, this route has federally funded Essential Air Service.

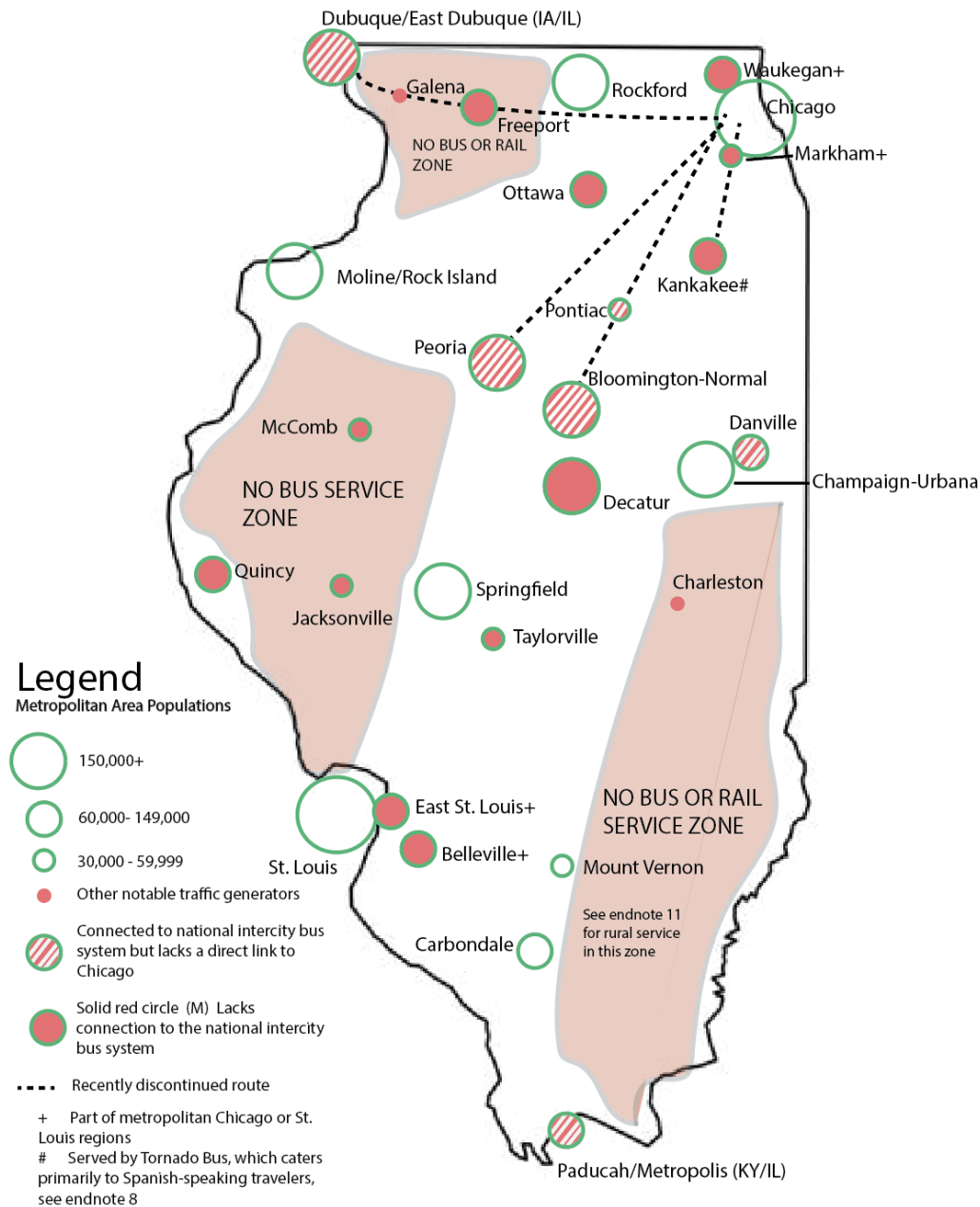


A sign at Chicago Union Station points to the nearby Blue Line and Greyhound Terminal

- *Peoria—Springfield* and *Peoria – Decatur*, ranking 15th and 19th, respectively, lack direct bus or train options. The Springfield route has a bus-train connection with hours-long waits at Bloomington, making the trip at least 4.5 hours, whereas driving takes little more than an hour. Buses once made the trip in 90 minutes.
- *Markham* lost service earlier last year. As recently as 2016, this south suburb had a staffed storefront station with ten daily buses.
- *Chicago—Dubuque, IA/East Dubuque, IL, via Galena and Freeport*, was recently discontinued, leaving these three Illinois cities without any scheduled intercity transportation.

Figure 1: Gaps in the Intercity Bus Service to Illinois’s Metropolitan Areas

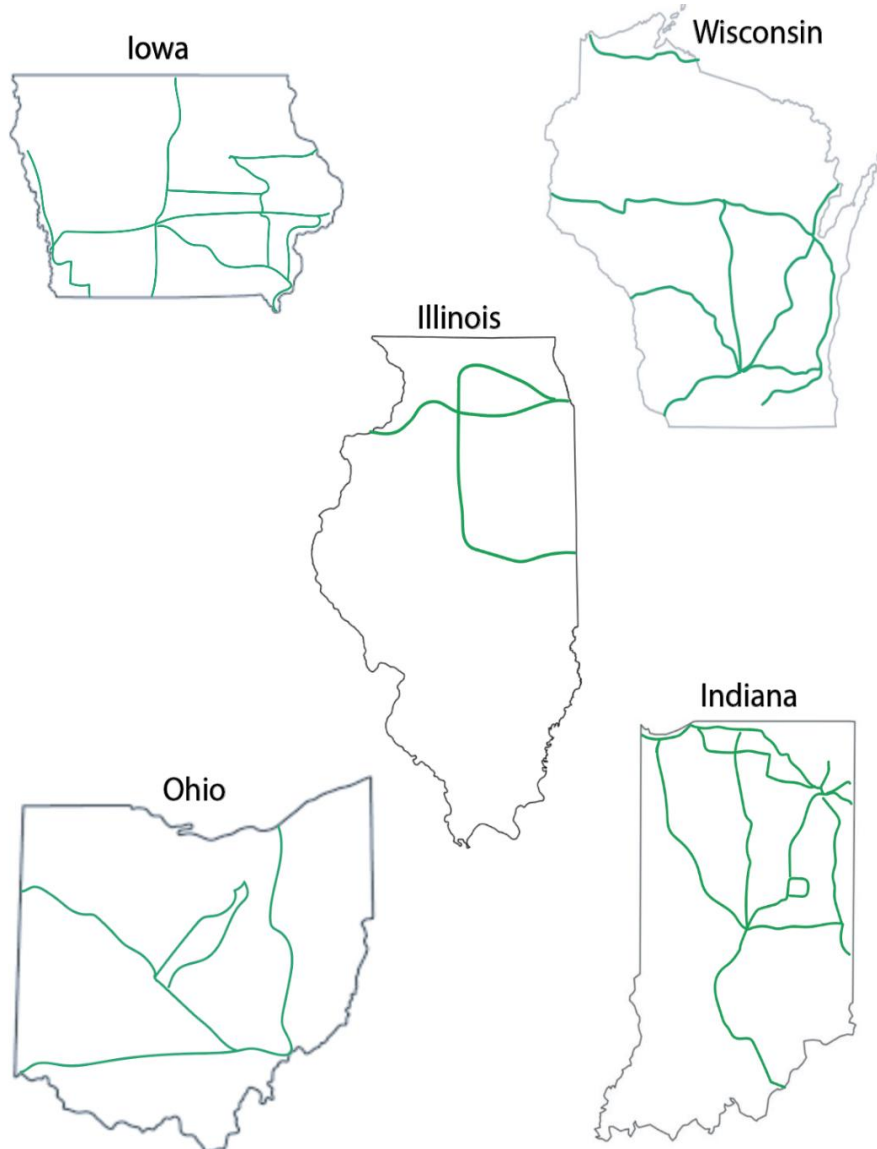
Red-shaded metro areas lack a connection to national bus network. Striped areas lack Chicago service



In addition, **the Chicago–St. Louis express service ceased**, with the only available service being via Champaign–Urbana. Illinois’s response has been limited. Its state-supported network, funded through the USDOT’s 5311(f) program, consists of two routes operated by Greyhound:

1. A twice-daily Chicago–Quad Cities service. This augments Burlington Trailway’s service to the Quad Cities, thus helping cultivate a market for eventual rail-passenger transportation, and has a stop in DeKalb, which otherwise lacks intercity bus service.
- 2) A once-daily Chicago–Rockford–Bloomington–Champaign–Danville route. This crescent-shaped and multipurpose route is oriented heavily toward commuters to warehouses and manufacturing facilities between Rockford and Bloomington. This route connects underserved communities but is not designed to link Chicago to any of the above cities except Rockford.

Figure 2: State-Supported Intercity Bus Network in Nearby Midwestern States




These maps illustrate the small scale of intercity bus services operated with state financial support, primarily through the USDOT’s 5311(f) program. The Illinois network consists of just two routes, far fewer than the other states. These maps may not reflect recent changes not documented in official state documents. Iowa offers a general subsidy for most in-state routes.

Illinois deserves credit for creating these routes, but its state-supported system encompasses just six daily bus operations (three roundtrips), making it far smaller than those in Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. All of these other states offer far greater coverage, with several having 18 or more daily operations. Although Illinois' extensive state-supported Amtrak system partially fills the void, the unique advantages of bus service are being overlooked, including:

- 1) Buses can stop at more convenient locations for travelers, including college campuses.
- 2) Taking the bus costs less and is more familiar for many disadvantaged groups.
- 3) Bus travelers can buy tickets to thousands of locations nationwide by transferring to other routes, often in Chicago.

As a result of the reductions in Illinois, many bus trips to out-of-state points are now unduly long and tedious. For example, a journey from Bloomington to Green Bay, WI, takes more than 24 hours, more than 12 hours longer than trips from Champaign, which (unlike Bloomington) has a direct link to Chicago.

Notable Bus Brands Managed by State Governments




Brands developed by state governments that offer an example of bus service programs that Illinois could emulate.

Our analysis shows that more than half (50.3%) of the population in Illinois outside metropolitan Chicago live more than 25 miles from a stop on the national intercity bus network. Approximately seven in ten (69.8%) are more than 10 miles (*See our summary on page 10*).

Finding IV. Many strategies other states use to create synergy between Amtrak and intercity bus services have yet to be employed in Illinois. By learning from California, Michigan, Oregon, Vermont, and other states, Springfield could better leverage its largely disconnected bus and train systems. Failing to do so hampers the development of Chicago as the country's preeminent long-distance ground transportation hub.

Illinois hasn't pursued many of the strategies that are enjoying success in other states. Some involve integrating bus and train services and selling both on the amtrak.com booking site. For example,

- **California** sells many intrastate bus services on amtrak.com and even allows reservations for bus-only trips on the platform, putting most bus and rail options in one place.
- **Michigan** has prioritized creating multimodal stations serving intercity bus, public transit, and train services.
- **Oregon** supplements its four daily Portland–Eugene trains with two bus trips, resulting in relatively even departure spacing throughout the day.

- **Vermont** staggers bus and train services on the Albany, NY–Burlington, VT route, with buses serving many locations missed by trains.
- **Washington State** supplements its twice-daily Seattle–Vancouver, BC train service with two bus connections and is evaluating the possibility of expanding bus connections as part of its range corridor expansion plan.¹⁰
- **Wisconsin** has helped develop well-timed transfers between trains and buses in Milwaukee to allow for fast Chicago–Green Bay, WI trips, with some connections less than 15 minutes.

Amtrak’s cooperative arrangement with Van Gander/Coach USA shows the potential for greater coordination in Illinois. Due to the bus line’s high schedule frequency, passengers arriving on the train en route to Rockford, IL, or Madison, WI, can often catch the bus with only short waits. This successful arrangement, however, was apparently created without much state or local involvement.

Illinois has attractive opportunities for better integrating and coordinating bus and train schedules, several of which are bolstered by CUS and the Greyhound Station’s close proximity. Several stand out:

- **Chicago–Champaign–Carbondale.** Despite three trains in each direction, there are no departures on amtrak.com southbound between 8:15 a.m. and 4 p.m. or after 8:05 p.m., creating a prime opportunity for a supplemental bus service.
- **Bloomington–Normal–Chicago.** Although there are five trains in each direction, the earliest arrival in Chicago is at 9:25 a.m., which is too late for those attending full-day events, particularly when accounting for delays. The last southbound train, leaving at 7:10 p.m., is too early for those working late or attending evening events.



A Greyhound bus arrives at the Chicago Terminal on April 20, 2024

Large gaps emerge when the *Texas Eagle* or other trains sell out, which is common due to strong demand and Amtrak equipment shortages.

- **Additional bus services would allow for stops on or near the campus** of Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Southern Illinois Edwardsville, and Olivette Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, military installations (such as Rantoul’s Chanute Air Force Base), major manufacturing clusters (such as the Rivian plant in Normal), and towns with correctional institutions, which now lack convenient service. The University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign could benefit from expanded service to Chicago, having lost the *Suburban Express* shuttle service in 2019.

Illinois could also promote its *existing services* to a greater extent.

- The state-supported **Chicago–Quad Cities** route could be added to the Amtrak Thruway network to create new connecting options, filling a void in the Amtrak system.
- The state could work with Peoria Charter Bus Lines and other **airport shuttle operators** to extend their Midway and O’Hare service to either downtown Chicago or area transit stops to make them more amenable to nonflyers.
- **Publicize notable rural bus-transit services**, such as routes linking Champaign to Danville and Carbondale to Cairo and Harrisburg, IL, as part of the statewide intercity bus and train systems, which are largely unknown to travelers outside those regions (*see discussion in endnote 11*).¹¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

Illinois’s intercity bus system is in a precarious position. Action is needed to stem the further decline of the Illinois network and preserve the vital Chicago terminals. Several actions are urgent:

- **The City of Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), supported by an intergovernmental working group, needs to take immediate action** to assess the feasibility of acquiring, improving, and operating the Chicago Greyhound Terminal. Within weeks, the working group should develop a strategy. This coalition could include Cook County, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, bus companies, and state officials. Several promising financial options should be explored, including tax increment financing and user fee payments for station operation.
- **A city-led assessment of interim options should be completed by mid-June for moving more bus services to the vicinity of Chicago Union Station if the existing terminal can’t be preserved for transportation use.** The assessment could be completed within a month, drawing upon input from bus companies, transit agencies, city departments, and other stakeholders.

Other needed actions require longer planning horizons but would allow for improvements within two years. The state government, led by IDOT, should:

- **Develop a brand name for Illinois’s state-supported network**, drawing upon the experiences of other states.
- **Establish a goal of ensuring that direct bus or rail service or well-coordinated bus/train transfers are available in all (or nearly all) of the state’s largest ten intercity routes.** This should include restoring direct service between downtown Chicago and Bloomington-Normal, Danville, and Peoria.
- **Follow the lead of many other states by creating a stakeholder committee to discuss and plan improvements to the statewide bus network.** These committees are often comprised of public agencies, metropolitan planning organizations, and bus companies and are used to explore opportunities to leverage funds to close gaps, expand bus-train coordination, and draw upon the lessons of other states.



Interested in the Intercity Bus Industry?

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APPENDIX

Proximity of Illinois Residents to Bus Service

We analyzed using ArcGIS and 2020 U.S. Census data on the proximity of the Illinois population outside metropolitan Chicago to national intercity bus network stops. We measured the distance from bus stops to the centroid of U.S. Census Blocks. We exclude the six-county metropolitan Chicago region due to the abundance of public transit service to intercity bus stops. This area covered has a total population of 3,200,222. Our results show:

- 50.3% of the population (2,194,837 people) in Illinois outside of metropolitan Chicago live more than 25 miles from an intercity bus stop.
- 69.8% of the population (3,046,494 people) in Illinois outside of metropolitan Chicago live more than 10 miles from an intercity bus stop.

Expanding the analysis to include carriers not linked to Greyhound and the rest of the national network (such as *Tornado Bus*) increases the percentage of served by less than three percentage points. We are conducting a demographic analysis¹² and a comparative analysis between states to be reported in *Intercity Bus E-News*. We thank Ola Klimczak for this analysis.

¹ The Chicago Sun-Times article, dated April 29, 2023, provides a significant example of news coverage on intercity bus transportation in Illinois. It can be accessed [here](#), and its content is highly relevant to our research.

² Refer to this CoStar article from January 11, 2024 for a market assessment, [available here](#).

³ For a summary of the Amtrak-Metra Homewood project, please refer to this Metra announcement dated March 7, 2024, available [here](#)

⁴ For an example of pushback that often occurs then Greyhound stations are moved, please refer to this coverage of the situation in [Houston](#) and Philadelphia

⁵ The Federal Government has received many requests for assistance from city governments regarding bus station problems. An effort is underway to revise a Federal Transit Administration Rural Circular to expand the applicability of funding for intercity bus stations. Federal interest in such investment has grown since the City of Chicago submitted a grant request for acquiring the Chicago Greyhound Terminal in mid-2023.

⁶ The study, *Statewide Intercity Passenger Transportation in Illinois (2022)*, by P. S. Sriraj, Paul Metaxatos, Jaeyong Shin, Casey Brazeal, Nahid Parvez Farazi, Scott Grieg, Elliott Lewis, and Jean Paul Manzanarez was prepared by the Urban Transportation Center at the University of Illinois Chicago for the Illinois Department of Transportation. It includes an analysis of travel demand, the results of interviews with major carriers, and insights into the statewide system, which can be accessed [here](#).

⁷ Viable service is defined as a bus service or bus-train connection in which a passenger can reach the destination at least as fast as a motorist traveling at an average of 25 mph along the shortest highway distance to the destination. Service options requiring long waits or with highly circuitous routing do not meet this minimal standard. Although some people may be willing to ride on a service below this threshold, most would regard it as unacceptably slow.

⁸ Tornado Bus operates twice daily between Milwaukee, Chicago, and Texas, and it stops in numerous downstate Illinois cities. The carrier targets its service to Spanish-speaking travelers and has its Chicago terminus at 3501 S California Avenue, a location unfamiliar to most and one not highly transit accessible. It is oriented primarily to travelers destined for Texas and beyond, with one-way fares between Chicago and Downstate often \$110 or more, roughly three times that formally charged by Greyhound. The carrier also lacks interline agreements with other bus lines and thus is not connected to the national intercity bus network, which limits its geographic reach. Although Tornado plays an important role, we do not consider it an option many travelers would consider for intrastate travel.

⁹ Peoria Charter Coach Lines is among the most prominent bus lines serving the mid-state region and has two principal routes: 1) A route linking Champaign–Urbana with Chicago Midway, Chicago O’Hare Airport, and Chicago Union Station, and 2) A Peoria–Normal–O’Hare route with several stops in Chicago’s western suburbs. Although the latter route is an important airport-oriented and suburban service, it is not well suited for Normal or Peoria travelers destined for points within Chicago other than O’Hare, or for connections to Greyhound and other national carriers. Due to the number of stops, including Normal, the Peoria–O’Hare trip is around 4.5 hours. Travelers originating in downtown Chicago using public transit to reach Normal or Peoria would need to make at least two transfers—one from the CTA Blue Line to the People Mover at O’Hare Airport and the other from the People Mover to the bus at the O’Hare Multimodal Center, adding about 90 minutes to the journey and making the trip six hours. Express buses once covered it in three.

¹⁰ Please refer to page ES-2 of the *Cascades Preliminary Service Development Plan (2024)*, available [here](#).

¹¹ Several fixed-route services enhance the statewide bus systems but do not meet our formal definition of intercity bus service. This includes RIDES MTD’s fixed schedules between Harrisburg and Carbondale, IL and other routes in this zone, and Shawnee MTD’s Cairo and Carbondale service. The latter encompasses four trips each way, Monday through Friday, but requires reservations to be made 24 hours in advance (schedule is [here](#)). Shawnee rural transit route makes nine intermediate stops, with most schedules covering roughly 81 miles in two hours. These services are important to regional mobility but are marketed akin to local transit services and are thus not searchable on major intercity bus-travel booking sites.

¹² Based on several surveys we reviewed, our estimate is that 45 - 48% of passengers on conventional intercity bus lines nationwide are black, Hispanic, or Latino, with roughly a third being black. The percentage of passengers represented by these minority groups at the Chicago Greyhound Terminal is likely higher due to our region's demographic composition.