

City and County of San Francisco

ESSENTIAL WORKER RIDE HOME PROGRAM

**San Francisco Department of the Environment
2022**

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Executive Summary

For nearly 12 years, the City and County of San Francisco has provided commuters a guaranteed ride home from work in case of an emergency through the [Emergency Ride Home](#) (ERH) program, administered by the San Francisco Department of the Environment (SF Environment). The goal of the program is to encourage San Francisco-based employees to commute sustainably by providing a free and secure ride home during an emergency.

In March 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, public transportation systems in San Francisco made necessary service reductions that impacted essential workers commuting to and within San Francisco. The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Authority (SFMTA) shut down its light rail network and suspended 80 percent of its bus lines, while the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system also made significant service reductions.



In light of these reductions, employees faced challenges commuting to and from work to provide essential services to the City. To support them, SF Environment, in collaboration with the ERH program funding partners, the San Francisco County Transportation Authority (SFCTA) and Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD), proposed to pivot and expand the existing ERH program to provide support for essential workers. The program was quickly adopted as the Essential Worker Ride Home (EWRH) program and launched on April 28, 2020.

In congruence with San Francisco's Transit First policy and the mission of the program's funding partners, the goals of the EWRH program were to help essential workers safely get home from their San Francisco-based jobs and to discourage drive-alone car commuting.

One month after launch, the EWRH program received 336 applications, 116 of which met the eligibility requirements and were approved. To meet the growing demand, SF Environment partnered with SFMTA's Paratransit vendor, Transdev, to implement a debit card system that would reduce the staff time required to manually process reimbursements and provide an enhanced user experience for essential workers. After implementation of the debit card system, the program reached its zenith in August 2021, providing 1,818 rides to 362 users in that month alone.

After 22 months of operation, the EWRH program ended on February 20, 2022. Overall, the program received 896 applications, approved 388 users, and provided a total of 6,136 rides to workers serving essential job functions such as healthcare workers, restaurant and retail staff, and social worker—including [Ivy Bennett](#), a residential counselor at a family shelter.

Amidst the compounding challenges that essential workers faced during the ongoing public health crisis, the EWRH program provided a safe and secure way to commute during the height of the pandemic. Through creative, inter-departmental collaboration, the City and County of San Francisco was able to identify funding sources, ideate a program expansion, conduct equitable program outreach, and launch a valuable service during a time of great need.

Scope and Objectives

The EWRH program leveraged the already-established operational framework set by the long-standing ERH program. Similar to the existing ERH program, commuters using the EWRH program were expected to take sustainable transit options into work and the goals for the program remained the same – reduce emissions and encourage sustainable mode choice by offering a reliable ride home from work.

The program was designed to cover the cost of up to 10 taxi rides home per month, per essential worker, up to \$70 per ride. Prospective program users were required to submit an application via the SF Environment website, then SF Environment staff verified the information and approved participants for the program. Once approved, participants could begin taking taxi trips home from work if transit was not available or if service had been drastically reduced. Participants were required to pay for the cost of the official taxi ride upfront and submit a reimbursement request online each week, accompanied by a taxi receipt.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Based on the budget available, SF Environment worked to design the EWRH program to maximize the number of people served, while also serving those most in need. To do so, eligibility requirements were set to ensure priority was given to essential employees working late at night, between 9:00 p.m. and 8:30 a.m., when transit reductions and safety concerns were at the highest. All applications and reimbursement requests were reviewed and verified by SF Environment staff to ensure compliance with these requirements. At the onset of the program, the below eligibility requirements were applied.

To be eligible for the program, riders must:

- Commute via sustainable mode
- Serve an essential job function with SF
- Certify that their employer or another entity does not already provide transportation benefits that include a guaranteed (or emergency) ride home program
- Start at work and end at home, or the location of their parked car, such as a transit station
- Take rides between 9:00 p.m. and 8:30 a.m., when public transit is most limited
- Use an official taxi

The requirements were later updated to remove the time-of-use limitation (9:00 p.m. and 8:30 a.m.) and add an option to use the program for rides to work, for those with limited access to public transportation. During program development, SF Environment had set the intention to expand access to the program once an assessment of demand and capacity was feasible after program launch, and once equitable, comprehensive outreach had been conducted. Based on demand and utilization, updating the program to expand eligibility allowed SF Environment to reach more people in need and increase program participation.

DEBIT CARD ADOPTION

Since the EWRH program leveraged the existing framework and administrative structure of the ERH program, which involves manual processing of taxi ride reimbursements, the ability to scale the EWRH program became a challenge. Around the same time that SF Environment launched the EWRH, the SFMTA had launched an Essential Trip Card (ETC) program to support seniors in need of transportation

for essential travel, such as trips to the doctor, pharmacy, or grocery store. SF Environment made the recommendation to adopt the debit card system used by the ETC program to increase EWRH program capacity.

After a thorough assessment, SF Environment, SFMTA, SFCTA, and third-party vendor Transdev determined that the CardOne debit card system could and should be integrated into the EWRH program. SF Environment created an updated program proposal that was approved by SFCTA Board Chair Mandelman. Once implemented in July 2021, the program was expanded to approve more applicants while also allowing for rides to work to be covered by the program.

Funding Source

The EWRH program received a total budget of \$447,500 through two separate funding sources. The first, \$197,500, was provided by the SFCTA-administered [Transportation Fund for Clean Air](#) (TFCA). One week after the program launched, more than 140 applications were received from essential workers interested in leveraging the service to support their commutes. To respond to the high demand, the SFCTA allocated an additional \$250,000 from the [Prop K sales tax fund](#) – San Francisco's voter-approved half-cent sales tax for transportation.

The initial tranche of funding from the TFCA program required SF Environment to follow BAAQMD's guidelines for use of funds, which did not authorize essential workers to receive reimbursements for rides to work, only those home from work. TFCA funds, which were reprogrammed from an SFMTA taxi program, were slated to expire October 31, 2020. After that date, the second tranche of funding was leveraged to approve additional users who needed support for rides to work late at night, when public transit was not available.

Program Closure

In August 2021, BART and Muni resumed near-regular service and operations. In light of the service updates, SF Environment reviewed the list of program users and removed those who could resume use of public transportation for their commutes. SF Environment emailed users who were no longer eligible and took service updates into account in assessing the eligibility of new applicants.

In December 2021, SF Environment began discussions with SFCTA staff regarding the closure of the program. SF Environment's recommendation to sunset the program was based on the following factors:

- The program was meant to provide a temporary response to an emergency situation.
- The stay-at-home order had been lifted, so there was no functional difference between essential workers and anyone else who was required to physically report to work.
- The most impactful reductions in transit service had been reversed.

"I want to extend my deepest appreciation for this program. It allowed me to travel safely and expeditiously to the different clinics and shelter-in-place hotels during the pandemic, especially since most routes were cancelled and/or taken away."

Richard Santana, Nurse

SF Environment notified users of the sunset date (February 20, 2022) in early January 2022. The program was closed on that date.

PROGRAM IMPACT

The EWRH program filled a critical gap in transportation access to essential workers during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The program received 896 applications, approved 388 users based on eligibility requirements, and provided a total of 6,136 taxi rides at a value of \$147,361.10.

Within the first month of operation, the program received 336 applications, followed by an additional 269 in August 2020, when SF Environment launched a paid digital marketing campaign (Figure 1). Application approvals slowed once the program reached operational capacity, but increased in July 2021, when the debit card system was implemented. The program continued to be a coveted resource until SF Environment stopped accepting applications in December 2021 with the anticipation of the program’s sunset date of February 20, 2022.

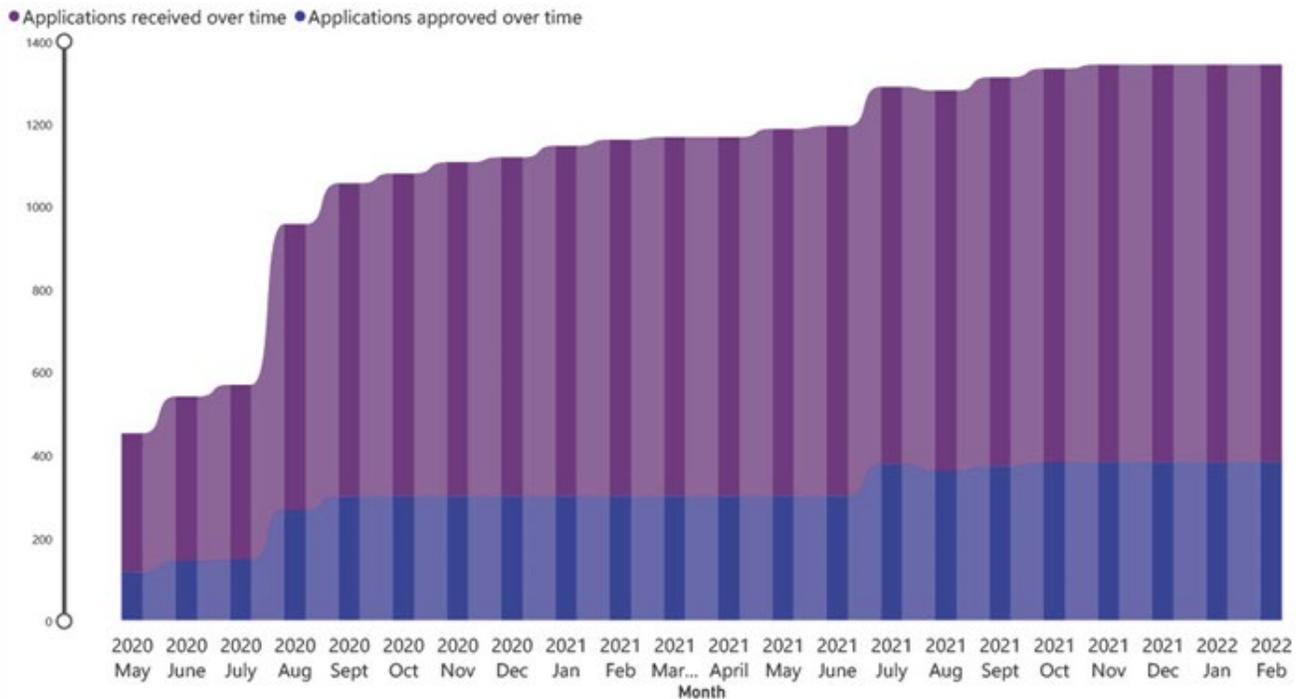


FIGURE 1: APPLICATIONS RECEIVED VERSUS APPROVED OVER TIME

PROGRAM APPLICANTS

Of 896 total applications received, 643 were San Francisco residents and 262 were commuters from outside of the City. Of the 643 San Francisco-based EWRH program applicants, each of the 11 supervisorial districts were represented. The majority, 101 applicants, commuted from District 6, followed by 77 applicants from District 5, and 71 from District 10 (Figure 2).

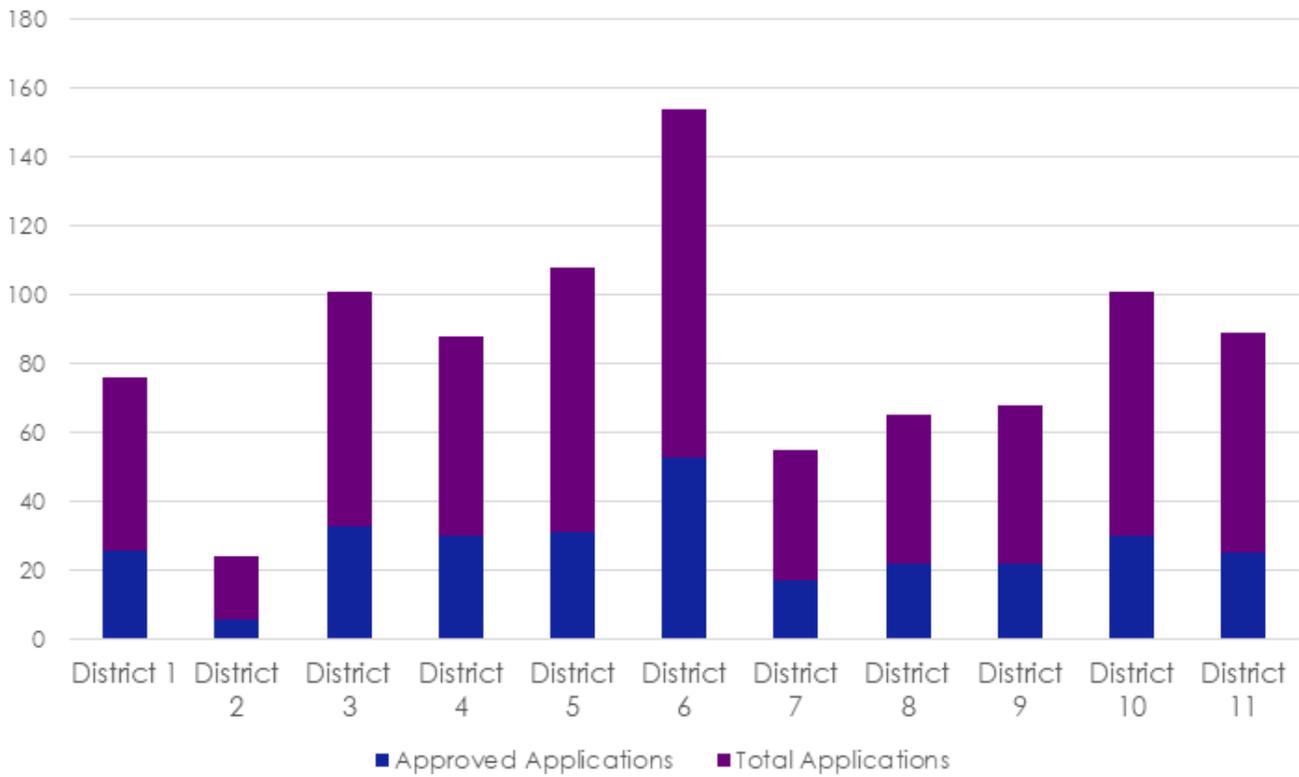


FIGURE 2: APPLICATIONS RECEIVED VERSUS APPROVED BY DISTRICT

APPROVED USERS

Of the 388 approved users, 295 (76%) commuted from within San Francisco, while 93 (24%) of users commuted from outside of the county, some from as far away as Antioch and Susuin City. Within San Francisco, commuters from District 6 represented the majority (53 participants) of program users, followed by 33 participants based in District 3, and 31 participants based in District 5. District 2 had the lowest EWRH program participation with 6 commuters based in this district.

INDUSTRIES & OCCUPATIONS

The program received applications from essential workers across a range of industries and occupations, including healthcare, social services, restaurant/retail, government, security, finance, and hospitality. Social services are defined here as non-profits or community-based organizations aiming to promote the well-being of the community.

Essential workers in this category include, but are not limited to, educators, residential and housing counselors, non-profit administrators, paralegals, and community organizers. Of approved program users, the top three industries represented were healthcare, social services, and restaurant and retail. Forty-four percent (170 users) worked in healthcare, followed by 21% (80 users) in social services, and

18% (69 users) in restaurant and retail (Figure 3). The “other” category includes a taxi driver, flight attendant, commercial property manager, lawyer, UPS worker, hair stylist, general laborer, program coordinator, and two front desk attendants from undisclosed companies.

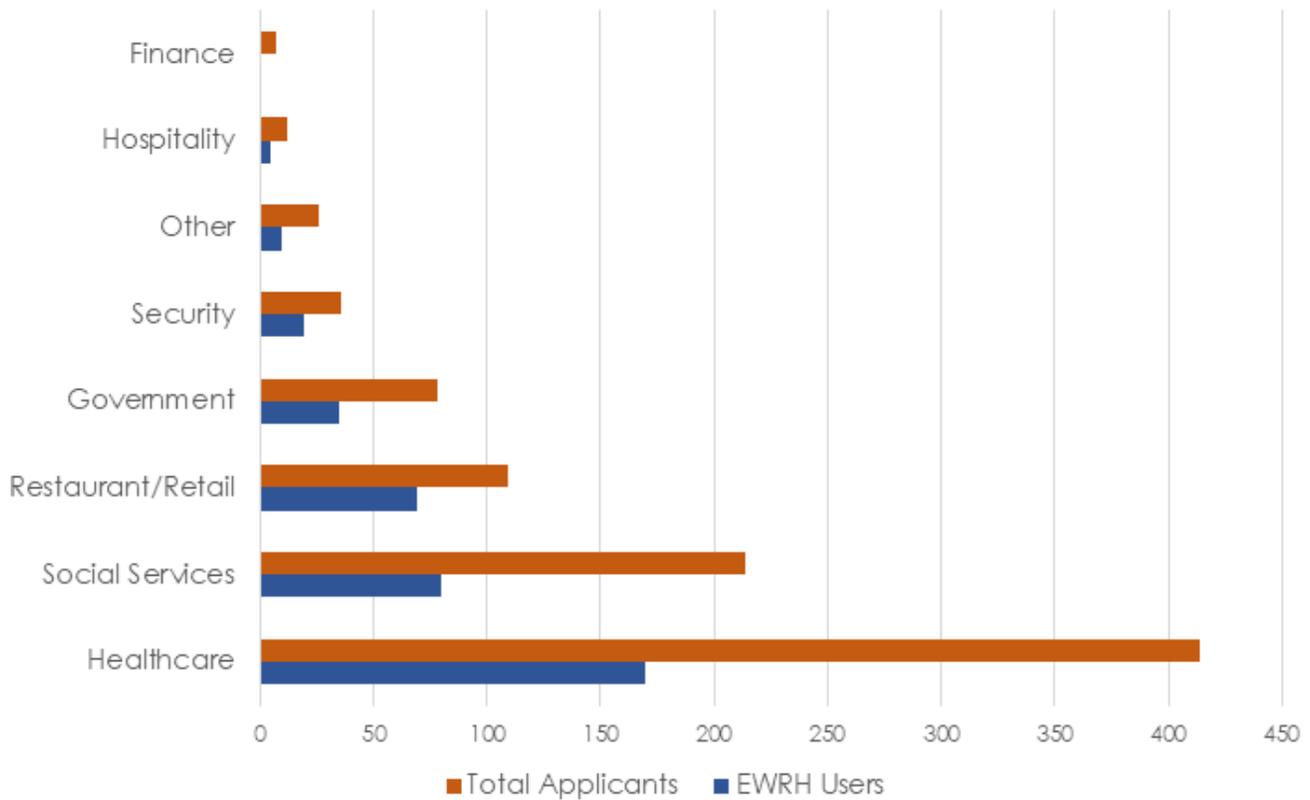


FIGURE 3: USERS VS APPLICANTS BY INDUSTRY

RIDES NUMBERS & VALUE

The EWRH program provided 986 rides in February 2021 and saw another peak in August 2021, with 1,818 total rides (Figure 4). Although it is unclear why the February peak in utilization occurred, it can be assumed that the August peak was a result of the debit card system, which increased program efficiency for the end users and allowed SF Environment to accept new program participants.

Throughout its lifespan, the program saw steady utilization and an average of 279 rides provided per month. In the final two months of operation (Jan 1—Feb 20, 2022), essential workers continued to take advantage of the service, with 441 trips taken in January and 384 trips taken during the first 20 days of February.

The highest amount of money spent on reimbursements occurred in August of 2021, with a total of \$13,569. In total, the EWRH program provided \$147,361.10 worth of rides to essential workers commuting to and within San Francisco throughout the pandemic.

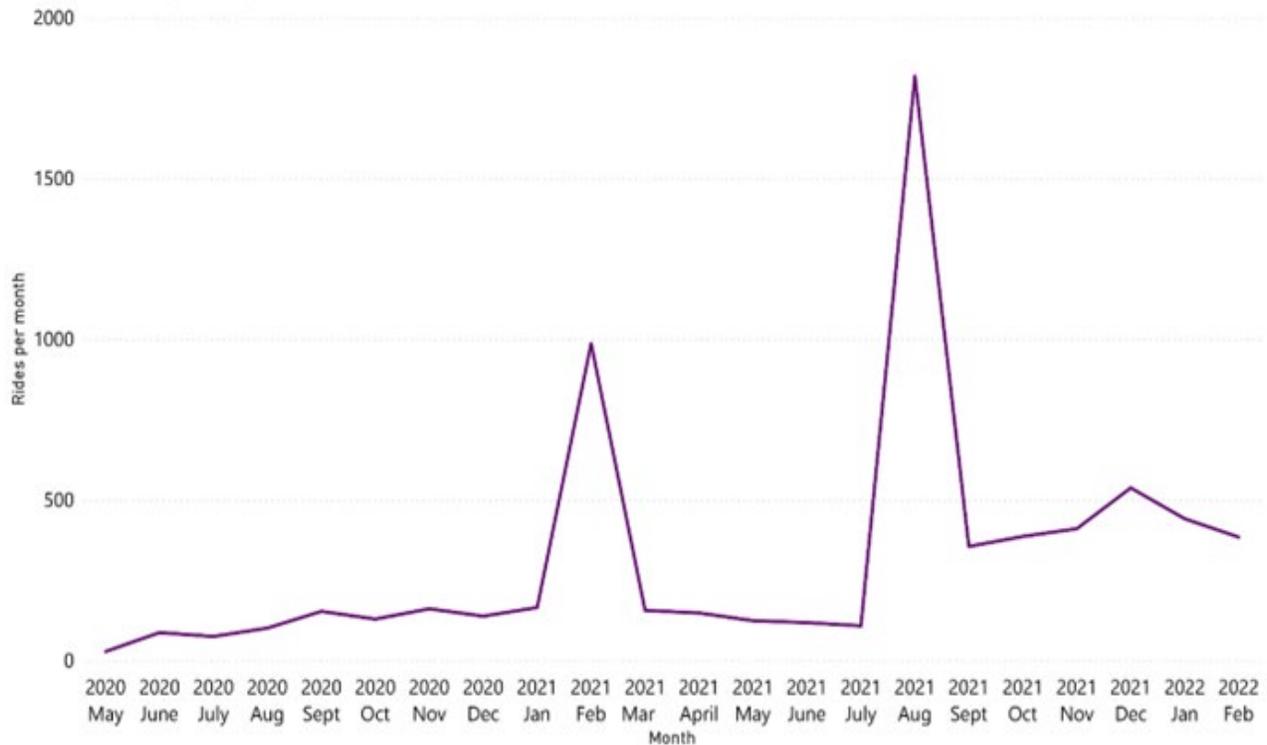


FIGURE 4: NUMBER OF RIDES PROVIDED PER MONTH

OUTREACH

Marketing and outreach efforts of the EWRH program were comprehensive, inclusive, and widespread. The goal of the marketing and outreach campaign was to build awareness for the program amongst essential workers who stood to benefit most, especially low-income employees with limited access to public transportation.

According to the Bay Area Equity Atlas, there are 1.1 million essential workers in the Bay Area, comprising about 28% of the workforce. People of color and immigrants disproportionately make up frontline workers, and workers of color are overrepresented in frontline industries overall, representing 58% of all workers, but 66% of essential workers. To ensure equitable access to the program, all communications, including the website, application form, reimbursement form, and social media toolkit, were translated into Chinese and Spanish, with language assistance from 311 and SF Environment staff also available. The majority of users (364) preferred communications in English, 16 preferred communications in Chinese, and 2 preferred communications in Spanish.

LOCAL OUTREACH & EARNED MEDIA

SF Environment worked with local community-based organizations (CBOs) to spread program awareness, as well as the City’s Covid Command Center for non-digital marketing and outreach to community centers, food banks, and local organizations serving Spanish- and Chinese-speaking communities.

The comprehensive plan included outreach to the following organizations: over 300 CBOs and small businesses, including the District Merchants and Arab Grocers Association; essential businesses affiliated with the Office of Economic and Workforce Development; the San Francisco Labor Council and critical unions such as SEIU Local 87 (Janitors); the San Francisco Human Rights Commission; the Office of Racial Equity; the LGBT Advisory Committee; faith-based organizations such as the Interfaith Council; the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing and the Human Services Agency, who notified essential workers in critical areas like the Shelter-in-Place Hotel Program; healthcare workers and staff at San Francisco General, Laguna Honda, and the San Francisco Chinese Hospital; local SF Environment partners, including Recology and the SF Green Business Network; Department of Human Resources (for distribution to essential CCSF employees, Disaster Service Workers, and Public Information Officers of each City department); San Francisco Supervisor offices, for support with direct outreach within each district; and local media outreach, resulting in coverage in English and Spanish on MissionLocal and Telemundo, as well as a spot on KALW radio.



DIGITAL MARKETING CAMPAIGN

SF Environment ran a paid digital marketing campaign August 4–September 11, 2020, targeted to communities of concern with limited access to transportation, as well as essential workers living outside of San Francisco, which were an active user group of the program (about 25% of approved participants).

The campaign included paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram, with ads in English, Chinese, and Spanish and prioritized targeting of commuters in Districts 5, 6, 9, and 10 in San Francisco. The paid campaign and supportive outreach efforts focused on equity and prioritized reaching those most in need of the service.

The campaign delivered 517,290 impressions and 6,214 landing page views, of which 96% were unique. Within the first month of the campaign, the program received 269 applications, its highest monthly rate since program launch and a 33% increase from the previous month. The campaign proved to be effective in reaching potential users who learned more about and were more likely to participate. It was also effective in driving Chinese (11) and Spanish (6) program registrations.

SF Environment also published organic (non-paid) social media content, which yielded 56,738 impressions, 1,084 engagements, 1.9% engagement rate (per impression), and 196 post clicks.

"Thank you so much for creating this program for all of us during those difficult times, it really helped me to get home safely at the late hour!"

Lucy Dvorkin, Homecare Provider

Combined, with the paid and organic campaigns, the program webpages received a high volume of engagement.

Webpage Metrics from Apr 1, 2020—Feb 20, 2022:

- English Webpage: 23,402 page views, 78.63% bounce rate
- Chinese Webpage: 3,054 page views, 90.84% bounce rate
- Spanish Webpage: 2,842 page views, 94.52% bounce rate

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Essential Worker Ride Home program provided a reliable and safe taxi ride home from work for hundreds of essential employees commuting to and within San Francisco, helping to fill the gap left by reductions in public transportation due the COVID-19 pandemic.

This program provided a quick response to support essential workers whose commutes were interrupted, but who were required to serve the City in a critical capacity during a time of crisis.

The program was rapidly deployed by leveraging the existing framework of the existing Emergency Ride Home program, which allowed for fast adoption – from concept to launch in two weeks – but the manual processes and administrative burden impacted its ability to scale rapidly. Through innovative ideation, the program increased capacity once the debit card system was adopted. The debit card system reduced the upfront financial burden to program users and reduced SF Environment staff time.



IVY BENNETT, RESIDENTIAL COUNSELOR, SF

Overall, the program was incredibly impactful, both as a means of providing an essential service to frontline staff as well as in supporting the City’s transportation demand management goals to reduce the number of trips taken by single-occupancy vehicle.