Statehouse Rail Network

A plan to build a national network of strong state rail advocacy groups.

Mitch Radakovich - 2026

Rail is won or lost in the statehouse

Federal support for passenger rail has never been stronger, yet it is still not enough. A route moves forward only when a state agrees to pay its share and stays committed long enough to build it. That decision is made in the statehouse, where most state rail advocacy groups don't yet have the organizational capacity to compete.

In 2010, Ohio gave back $400 million in federal funding for the 3C corridor connecting Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. Wisconsin turned down $810 million and Florida $2.4 billion around the same time. The money was on the table. What was missing was a statewide coalition strong enough to defend it.

Even where statehouses have fallen short, public support for rail is strong. In a 2022 national poll by Change Research, 78% of Americans backed investing in passenger rail, including 61% of Republicans. But that support is rarely visible to decision makers without someone organizing it.

Many states have a rail passenger association, some dating to the 1970s. Their founders kept passenger rail alive as a policy issue through decades when almost nobody else cared, and at times in the face of open hostility. Many of these organizations were built for an earlier era of advocacy, and adapting has been hard. Governance can be slow, communication can be inward-facing, and newer supporters often have no clear way to take on real roles. These are problems of organizational design. They can be fixed, with patience and with the people who built these organizations leading the way.

Where state rail advocacy stands today

State rail advocacy looks very different from one state to the next. *[Summary from the national landscape assessment: how many states fall at each level.]*

To fit support to each state, this plan sorts organizations into five levels based on how they are set up and staffed.

- **Level 0:** exists on paper only, or as a name for a small group of volunteers.
- **Level 1:** active and making some progress, but needs to grow significantly to reach its goals.
- **Level 2:** active and effective, but mostly volunteer-run, with a risk of burnout and not yet enough fundraising to pay full-time staff.

- **Level 3:** has a full-time paid executive director and the fundraising to sustain the role, with enough volunteers that the organization does not depend on any one leader.
- **Level 4:** self-sufficient, with more paid staff where the state chooses to invest. The executive director leads strategy, and the board focuses on governance.

The Statehouse Rail Network will help states move through these levels, starting from wherever each one is today.

Ohio shows what a rebuilt organization can do

In four years, All Aboard Ohio moved from Level 1 to Level 2. It went from nearly dormant to one of the most active state rail advocacy groups in the country, with no more than 20 hours a week of paid staff. The change came from rebuilding how the organization works: meaningful roles for new volunteers, a robust and youthful communications operation, chapters in the regions legislators represent, and simpler governance.

- **Members:** from about 200 to more than 8,000, organized into eight chapters
- **Statehouse:** helped move SB 449, bipartisan legislation to bring Ohio back into the Midwest Interstate Passenger Rail Commission, and saw the Ohio House include every one of its priorities in its version of the last state budget
- **Coalition:** helped establish a statewide coalition of cities, regional planning agencies, and businesses
- **Reach:** 10.2 million social media impressions and 41 earned media stories in the past year

Ohio's work is not finished. There is no train yet, and the state budget priorities the House adopted did not survive conference.

Much of what worked in Ohio could be reapplied to other states. Strategy will differ with each state's politics, while the jobs an effective organization has to do stay much the same. With a clear plan for how the organization is run and the technology to support it, other states can avoid many of the growing pains Ohio went through.

> "I have seen similar blueprints achieve remarkable advocacy successes, while inspiring donors to give more."
>
> Christopher Ott, President, Wisconsin Association of Railroad Passengers

Phase 1: the pilot

Over 12 months, three states work alongside All Aboard Ohio to learn whether the methods that worked in Ohio can be adapted elsewhere, and what that costs.

Four different starting points

The pilot states are chosen to differ from one another on purpose:

- A state starting from Level 0, with no active organization.
- A long-standing Level 1 organization whose leaders see the need for change.
- A strong Level 1 organization, close to reaching Level 2, that wants to get even stronger.
- A Level 2 organization moving to paid staff, so that its success outlasts the volunteers who built it.

The fourth is All Aboard Ohio, where these methods were first developed. It takes part as a peer, working toward its first full-time executive director. Its staffing is funded separately. The four leaders work as a small cohort, trading what works as they go.

[Pilot states named here once each has agreed to take part.]

Starting where each state is

Every state begins by listening. In the first two months, the program lead and a mentor meet with each organization's board and longtime leaders, take stock of where the organization stands, and agree with them on what to work on first. In a state with no organization, those first two months go to finding the local advocates who will found one. Changes to governance are made when the state's own leaders decide they are needed.

The work then focuses on the core jobs described below, beginning where each state's leaders and their mentor decide.

What each state gets

- **A starter kit.** Templates for how each part of the organization runs, role profiles, a chapter model, communications playbooks, and a ready-to-launch technical suite with a website, shared email and documents, team chat, and a starter CRM. States adapt it to fit their situation.
- **A dedicated mentor.** An experienced volunteer advocate giving about two hours a week.
- **Coaching** from the program lead.
- **Seed funding** of $10,000 over the pilot, paid quarterly against milestones the state helped set. All Aboard Ohio receives no seed funding.
- **Peers.** Leaders from the other states, meeting monthly and in person at the kickoff. Running a state advocacy group is lonely work, and most leaders have no one else in their state doing the same job. Peers facing the same problems at the same time trade what works and help each other through the hard months.

Measuring success

Each state is measured on whether the core jobs of an effective organization are running on schedule without depending on its top leader.

1. **Board:** meets on schedule and approves a budget.
2. **Finances:** books are kept and filings are current.
3. **Volunteers:** new volunteers are given a role within a set time.
4. **Communications:** regular social media and a newsletter, with someone responsible for press.
5. **Member giving:** renewals and fundraising asks on a set schedule.
6. **Statehouse:** relevant bills are tracked and legislators are contacted regularly.
7. **Chapters:** a written chapter strategy and at least two active chapters.

Progress is tracked through a shared dashboard that reads from the tools each state already uses, so reporting takes little of the states' time. Growth in membership, counting both individual members and organizational partners, is tracked alongside the core jobs, with each state's starting point as the baseline. A check at month 6 catches problems early, and each state is reviewed at month 11. An independent evaluator documents what worked and what it cost, and Phase 2 goes ahead only if all four states pass. The full measurement approach is in the appendix.

How the pilot is run

The pilot is run by an established national nonprofit acting as host organization. The host employs the program lead and holds the pilot's funds in a restricted account. The program lead runs the pilot day to day, coaching each state and working with its mentor. The host does not set or enforce standards for state organizations, and each state keeps its own board and bylaws.

An advisory group of experienced advocates from several states, including leaders outside the pilot, gives feedback on the starter kit before launch.

The pilot is fully funded before it launches, and its budget covers the host's cost of administering it.

Pilot budget (12 months)

Line item	Cost
Program lead (salary and benefits, 12 months)	$137,500
Travel to pilot states	$20,000
Kickoff convening (in person)	$20,000
State seed funding (3 states at $10,000)	$30,000
Mentor and advisory group expenses	$7,500
Independent evaluation	$15,000
Direct costs	**$230,000**
Host organization administration and supervision (15%)	$34,500
Total	**$264,500**

Phase 2: scaling

Phase 2 brings more states into the network in cohorts, using the same methods as the pilot. Each state gets the resources to reach Level 2, then coaching and guidance to move toward Levels 3 and 4. The budget for this phase will be built from what the pilot actually cost per state, so no figure is given here.

- **Cohorts.** States join in groups of six to eight and receive about two years of coaching and mentoring, starting with an in-person retreat. The pilot states continue for a second year alongside the first cohort, and their leaders help mentor it. Graduates of earlier cohorts become mentors for later ones.
- **Staff that grows with the program.** Coaching staff are added as states join, at roughly one coach for every *[eight to ten]* active states.
- **Shared ownership.** A council of state leaders helps govern the program, so the network belongs to the states in it and no single state sets the rules for the others.
- **Long-term funding.** Phase 2 begins only once there is a plan to sustain the program after its first grants end without relying on the host's core budget, built around the standing network described below.

The long-term aim is organizations at Level 2 or higher in 20 to 30 states, with durability coming before scale.

Phase 3: a standing network

Once most participating states reach Level 2, the program lead's role shifts from helping states build their organizations to helping them work together on a national plan, coordinating on multistate corridors and federal funding where no single state can win alone. That role needs far fewer staff than coaching cohorts, and it can be funded by the state organizations that rely on it, alongside national sponsors. This is how the network sustains itself after its first grants end.

Risks and how the pilot manages them

Risk	How we manage it
Longtime leaders resist change	The starter kit includes guidance on working with longtime leaders, so everyone has a voice while the mission moves forward
Ohio's results depended on its leaders and may not carry over	The starter kit breaks the work of running an organization into small, defined tasks that volunteers can pick up, so success does not rest on one person
A state stalls	Seed funding is paid quarterly against milestones and pauses if a state stops making progress
A state starting from scratch is not ready by month 11	The month 6 check flags it early, and the independent evaluation separates problems with the model from problems in one state
A state's top leader steps away mid-pilot	Early on, each state builds a small core team around its leader, including basic succession planning, so the work continues if the leader steps away
States operate in very different environments	The starter kit adapts as states give input, from the tools a state already uses to its legislative calendar
A mentor drops out	Each state has a backup mentor