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## How Transit Agencies are Alleviating Demand for Paratransit Services

Posted on May 3, 2017 by Alex Roman, Managing Editor

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MCTS

In METRO's 2016 Annual Paratransit Survey, 70% of respondents reported that the number of riders transported in 2015 was higher than the previous year, with 17% reporting that demand was also one of their greatest challenges.

With demographic shifts predicted to bring a growing number of senior citizens across the nation and costs and demand

for paratransit services continuing to soar, many agencies are re-examining the way they provide paratransit services. In some cases, they have also been able to find ways to increase mobility options for seniors and people with disabilities who have historically had limited freedom of mobility when using their paratransit system.

### Kansas City Area Transportation Authority

The Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA) has been working on making travel easier for seniors and people with disabilities over the last year-plus, and recently rolled out free fixed-route rides for both veterans and its paratransit customers. Part of the driver for KCATA's increased focus on mobility for its paratransit customers stems from



RideKC Freedom On-Demand will enable paratransit customers to schedule TNC-like, on-demand trips via an app or by calling the agency's service center.

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President/CEO Robbie Makinen's unique perspective.

"I lost my vision about five years ago and got put right into the paratransit system, and when I did, I experienced the barriers that people who use the system have to deal with every day," he says. "Barriers like having to plan a trip 24 hours in advance and having the 30-minute window each way. We have plenty of folks like me who just want to contribute. We want to do our jobs. We want to compete. So, those barriers had to be broken down."

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In an attempt to remove those barriers as well as remove the stigma associated with having to use the paratransit system, KCATA is set to launch RideKC Freedom On-Demand, which will enable paratransit customers to schedule TNC-like, on-demand trips via an app or by calling the agency's service center.

"We want to change that core service, that cornerstone of our transit service that we provide for our most vulnerable population, which is our seniors and people with disabilities," says Makinen. "What we're trying to do at KCATA is look at public transportation through the looking glass here, and imagine what it could look like in 50 years. We are looking at how we can create a service that is an on-demand, TNC-type service, but is still associated with a transit authority."

The impetus for taking a look at how public transportation could be revamped began when KCATA launched a pilot program with the "pop-up," app-based transportation provider Bridj, Makinen explains.

"Bridj was a great pilot program for us, because it allowed us to look at public transportation a whole new way and capture folks who normally wouldn't ride public transportation," he says. "It also allowed us to adapt the program to fit our needs here in Kansas City, where we are spread out across numerous municipalities and county and state lines because we are a bi-state agency. By adding up the lessons learned from the Bridj pilot, we ended up putting together our rebranded paratransit service RideKC Freedom, which this new on-demand system is a part of."

**Takeaway**

"We all have to start looking at transportation as a whole entity. It can't be us versus them," Makinen says. "What we need to do is open up the tent and let everybody in. So, if we talk to Uber and Lyft and can fit them into this program, my feeling is why not? And, we look forward to that being a possibility."

RideKC Freedom On-Demand, which will initially serve two major parts of the Kansas City region — one north of the Missouri River and another south of the river — allows eligible paratransit users to take an on-demand trip at any time, where they pay \$3 for the first eight miles and \$2 for every mile thereafter. The general public can also use the program, but are charged \$10 for the first five miles and \$2 for every mile after. As an extra feature, Transdev, which provides KCATA's paratransit service, will return a portion of the full-fare trips back to the agency to reinvest in service.

"What we have done here is provide the same service to our paratransit customers that we

provide to our non-paratransit customers," Makinen says. "I am riding in the same cars. If I need a wheelchair-accessible vehicle it is available. And, if a customer doesn't happen to have a cell phone, they can call our call center and they will set it all up for them. So nobody is being disadvantaged. We have had a lot of our advocates try out the new system and they are amazed by it, and so am I."

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If the pilot project is successful, Makinen says KCATA will be able to take the on-demand model and implement it anywhere in the agency's service area.

"Once this model is perfected, we should be able to pick this up and go to a city or municipality and say 'we can provide your paratransit service, all you need to do is help us subsidize the program,'" he explains. "The app and the fare collection will all be set up for them. The drivers will all have background checks and all those safety boxes will be ticked off. It's really a unique concept and we're very pleased to be bringing it out to our customers."

**Laketran**

While many have talked about how the so-called "Silver Tsunami" is set to have a great impact on transit agencies around the nation, Lake County, Ohio's Laketran is already starting to experience that growth.

"A lot of people talk about how the amount of seniors in the U.S. is going to grow like it's something that will happen down the line, but it hit us and has been here for three years," says Laketran Deputy GM Ben Capelle, who explains that the amount of seniors using the agency's Dial-A-Ride system has grown nearly 17% over the last three years.

The so-called "Silver Tsunami" has resulted in a 14% increase in ridership on Laketran's Dial-A-Ride service over the last three years.

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With ridership up by 14% over the last three years and Dial-A-Ride and the demand-response system the preferred method of travel for many of the system's paratransit customers, Laketran's board of trustees recently gave the agency the green light to apply for federal grant funding for 18 paratransit vehicles to replace obsolete ones and increase its Dial-A-Ride fleet by five by 2018.

"The number of vehicles our calculations tell us we should have are around 92. We are currently increasing our fleet from 80 to 85, and will continue to do so incrementally," Capelle says. "We don't want to have too many vehicles, because sometimes the math tells you one thing, but operationally you can accommodate another. So, we're doing it incrementally and once we get past our pain point, then we'll stop buying vehicles."

The buses purchased by Laketran will be equipped with a wheelchair lift, fold-up seats to accommodate up to four wheelchairs, slip-resistant flooring, an electronic transit door, and a central heating and cooling unit in response to customer concerns about vehicles being too hot or too cold. Additional safety amenities include seatbelts, clearance lights, Mor-Ryde suspension, and safety cameras. Over the last three years, Laketran has also increased the amount of drivers by 35 to 40 people, bringing the total amount of drivers on staff to 150. Even still, Capelle explains the agency is still having issues keeping up with demand.

“We’ve increased our fleet, increased the number of drivers and the hours they are working, and really just thrown everything we can at the issue, but we’re still not really keeping up with the demand increases,” he says. “The thing we’re a little nervous about is if it doesn’t slow down, we’re not going to have to cut service, but we’re going to have to kind of restrict it in some way.”

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To limit demand, Capelle explains that Laketran has implemented a Travel Training program and a senior-focused program, “Seniors on the Go,” that is 100% tailored to help seniors learn how to use all parts of the agency’s system. However, because of the efficiency of the system and the impact weather can have on the area, demand-response and Dial-A-Ride services remains the top choice for seniors in the area.

“We try and get people onto our fixed-route as much as we can, unfortunately, Laketran is unique because our Dial-A-Ride and demand-response services are our bread and butter and is really what we are known for in the community,” explains Capelle. “Also, here in Northeast Ohio with the weather we have, winter can be a challenge of its own. We have some seniors that do ride the bus in the summer, but switch to our demand-response services in winter because they just can’t navigate in the snow.”

To further cut costs in hopes of keeping up with demand, Laketran also recently built a propane fueling station and will begin transitioning its fleet to propane, beginning with the 18 new vehicles they are ordering.

“We expect to save 35 percent on our demand-response fuel budget once all of our buses are propane,” Capelle says. “We are anticipating it to take five to six years to complete the transition over to propane.”

**Takeaway**

“Like any agency you always want to look at ways to control or reduce costs,” says Capelle. “For instance, when we began exploring switching to propane, we discovered it would be cheap and easy for us to do so and the cost savings for us are going to be enormous. I’d suggest any agency similar to Laketran to also explore the possibility of switching to propane.”

**Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority**

Searching for ways to alleviate demand on its The RIDE paratransit system and increase options for customers, Boston’s Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) launched a pilot program in October that enabled 400 people to begin taking subsidized trips using ride-hailing services Uber and Lyft. By late February, the agency expanded the offer to all of its customers eligible for The RIDE and announced it had already provided 10,000 trips through the partnership.



The MBTA’s pilot with Uber and Lyft allowed paratransit users to take 28% more trips. Gov. Charlie Baker is pictured announcing program at the Perkins School for the Blind.

The aim of the partnership with Uber and Lyft, according to Brian Shortsleeve, chief administrator and acting GM, and Ben Schutzman, director of transportation innovation, was to improve customer flexibility and mobility, provide equal or better service at a lower cost, test how to convert trips from The RIDE to on-demand options, and identify the financial and operational feasibility of a new model.

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“We are very focused on finding new ways to do business and getting this agency to be more innovative in an attempt to modernize everywhere we can,” says Shortsleeve, “Generally, the old ways of doing business are no longer viable, and partnering with private companies like Uber and Lyft, is a really important path forward for agencies, because it has a positive impact on the customer’s experience while also significantly reducing costs.”

During the initial 400-person pilot project, MBTA found that those customers were able to experience shorter wait times, essentially eliminating the 30-minute pickup window; same-day booking as opposed to having schedule rides 12 to 24 hours in advance; faster trips (saving about 34 minutes per trip on average), and the elimination of shared rides.

More importantly for the agency, the program allowed customers to take about 28% more trips at a reduced overall cost of about 80% — from \$46 per trip on The Ride to about \$9 per trip using Uber and Lyft.

**Takeaway**

“Without biweekly touch points with Uber and Lyft, as well as conversations with our advocates on a regular basis, more problems could have really occurred,” says Schutzman. “If you take a program like this and set it and forget it, you might not be able to correct it along the way as we were able to do so quickly by keeping that open line of communication.”

One big key for the MBTA in setting up the program with Uber and Lyft was to engage its customers, shareholders, and the advocacy community, Shortsleeve explains.

“We spoke about this very publicly and hosted over 90 meetings here at MBTA with our fiscal management control board over the last 18 months,” he says. “We have been very transparent both with this program and all of our programs here at the agency.”

“The advocate community was very supportive and helpful to us in getting the word out about the pilot and designing key elements of this program,” adds Schutzman. “Uber and Lyft brought their cultures of innovation, but trusting the advocate community and their opinion as well really created the seeds of this pilot program.”

Schutzman adds that another key to the implementation of the program was to view it as a working pilot that could be tweaked and updated along the way to improve the experience for customers.

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“The core way we started the program six months ago stayed intact, but we have really tried to change and improve things based on customer feedback along the way too,” he says. “For example, we heard customers say they wanted the entire



service area covered, and we are able to do that within a matter of days. We have really been able to tweak different parts of the program based on customer feedback and our internal review of metrics on a weekly basis, and without that intensive focus on constantly testing and iterating, I don't think we would be at the place we are today."

The MBTA measured customer satisfaction of the pilot program using an indicator called a Net Promoter Score (NPS). Using a simple question — "On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend this company's service to a friend?" — NPS classifies the customer's responses in three categories — promoters, passives, and detractors — and calculates a percentage based on the number of "promoters" minus the percentage of "detractors." On average, public transit's NPS comes in at about 12% positive, but in January 2017, The RIDE's pilot with Uber and Lyft came in at 79% positive, which also impacted its overall fixed-route NPS by 10%.

"The program really proved to be a win-win on every level for us on all level and by all indicators," says Shortsleeve.



In 2016, MCTS provided a record 104,317 rides on its fixed-route system to customers that required securement assistance.

### Milwaukee County Transit System

Years of outreach and training by the Wis.-based Milwaukee County Transit System (MCTS) recently led to the agency providing more than 100,000 rides on its regular fixed-route system to passengers who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices.

"We've been tracking these types of boardings since at least 2007, and the number of boardings has doubled since we began a really focused and concentrated effort to make the bus system more accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities," explains Tracy Harrington, director, paratransit services, MCTS.

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The agency's efforts to both alleviate the financial constraints of providing paratransit service, while also providing those customers with greater freedom of travel, essentially launched in 2009 when the agency landed a New Freedom federal grant.

With that grant, MCTS setup the New Freedom Team, which includes both a full-time and part-time mobility coordinator, a part-time travel trainer, and a part-time bus stop barrier analyst. As part of the program, the agency also began offering free bus fares to anyone who had conditional eligibility to use paratransit services.

"That was another factor that made fixed-route services very attractive to people who wanted to try the bus, and it encouraged them to increase their usage once they felt comfortable using the system," says Harrington. "In fact, we are now expanding the program to include people with unconditional eligibility, so that when they have assistance with them some of their trips can be taken using the bus, giving them the chance to enjoy expanded community mobility as well."

In addition to offering paratransit customers, as well as the community as a whole, one-on-one and group travel training to better negotiate its fixed-route bus system, MCTS also increased its training practices for drivers, so they can understand how they can help present a welcoming face to people with disabilities and learn how to better assist them when riding the system.

“We have people from the disability advocacy community, one who uses a power mobility device and another that is blind and uses a service dog, that come in and assist us with our trainings, so drivers really get firsthand information on what it’s like to walk in the shoes of a person with a disability,” explains Harrington. “Some of the training we provide, includes ADA-sensitivity, hands-on securement, and simulations of visual disabilities, where they wear goggles that present them with different disability conditions.”

The New Freedom program also enabled MCTS to implement a barrier removal project that targeted non-ADA compliant bus stops in the community. Since 2009, the agency has improved 327 bus stops as part of the program, increasing boardings at those stops by 14.6%, Harrington explains.

“Our bus stop barrier analyst went out and did a map update targeting what stops were already ADA accessible and which were yet to be improved, and then, did an analysis to see where the priority for upgrading those stops needed to be,” she says. “It’s incredible how much of a difference it makes having a concrete bus pad and a connecting sidewalk at a bus stop. Having said that, there are some stops that will be beyond our reach, but the program has still made quite an impact.”

#### Takeaway

“I strongly suggest that agencies bring in members of the advocacy community when they are designing their paratransit program,” says Harrington. “It is vital to be able to get the insight from people with disabilities as to what does and does not work, as well as what their ideal system would look like. We will never have all the resources in the world, but it’s important to blue sky and then see what we can plausibly do.”

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The New Freedom program has made quite an impact at MCTS. According to the agency’s figures, passengers boarding the fixed-route bus system that required securement assistance has essentially doubled, going from 51,900 boardings in 2009 to a record 104,317 boardings in 2016. Meanwhile, overall ridership on the MCTS paratransit system has decreased, going from 1.17 million trips in 2009 to 530,989 trips in 2016.

“By decreasing our paratransit boardings, we were able to give money back to Milwaukee County, who partially funds the transit system through a property tax levy, so it’s good news for taxpayers,” Harrington says. “It also helps with the sustainability of the transit system overall, and in particular the paratransit system for people who don’t have another option.”

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