



1425 K Street NW • Suite 200 • Washington, D.C. 20005  
(202) 347-3066 • (202) 737-7914 (Fax) • (202) 347-7385 (TDD) • Toll-free (866) 528-6278

---

## **The Changing Paradigm for Paratransit FACT SHEET #1**

### **Why is Paratransit So Important and What are the Human and Economic Costs When Paratransit is Not Available?**

“We need to stop looking at paratransit users as something different. They are a very important part of our society. Many of the paratransit riders are clergy, lawyers, and high school teachers, so why look at them as being different from the community?”

- Victor Burke, Executive Vice President, Dallas Area Rapid Transit

Paratransit is critical to ensuring that people with disabilities and older adults have the opportunity to remain active, engaged members of their communities. For many, it also serves as a lifeline to essential services, such as medical treatment and meal programs, as well as social and spiritual activities. Paratransit provides freedom of mobility, transportation choice, and promotes dignity and privacy in the lives of older adults and people with disabilities.

In addition to providing personal opportunity, paratransit also has a greater role in how society functions. According to a Transit Cooperative Research Program report, “The lack of personal mobility has economic, social, and human costs, such as higher unemployment, reduced tax revenue, greater welfare and medical costs, and limited social potential.”<sup>i</sup>

As the title indicates, this fact sheet provides answers to important questions about the availability of paratransit.

### **How Does Paratransit Benefit People with Disabilities and Older Adults?**

- **Access to essential life-supporting activities**

A frail older woman needed to go to her doctor who was located 15 miles from the woman’s home. The paratransit driver for Life Stream in Indiana transported the woman to her destination, waited while she completed her visit, and then drove her home—a four-hour trip. This rider could not have undergone required medical tests without the service.

- **Access to employment**

Many paratransit operators note that employment is almost always among the top three or four reasons people use paratransit. Communities, and society in general, benefit when people are actively seeking employment or are employed and have a reliable means for transportation to get to their jobs. These benefits include an increase in employee reliability and reduction of absenteeism.

- **Access to social and other community activities, avoidance of institutionalization, and possible reduction in medical and social service expenses**

Paratransit can defer or eliminate the need for costly institutionalization in nursing homes and other facilities by enabling access to community-based services, such as medical care and meal programs. Promoting participation in social networks can prevent or lessen the effects of depression as well as deter physical decline and institutionalization.

- **Emergency evacuations**

Accessible transit systems and an emergency plan make it possible to evacuate people with disabilities and older adults. Sean Solan, transportation manager for Wind River Transportation Authority in rural Wyoming said that his public transit system has conducted two separate evacuations at a convalescent hospital; one because of a chemical spill and the other because of a fire.

## **How Does Paratransit Benefit the Community?**

- **Economic benefit**

For some communities, paratransit can serve as an economic engine of its own. For example, Access Transportation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, delivers people to destinations where they work and spend money. It transports students to school, employees to work, and people to health care, while also adding value by helping to involve people in the community. In addition, the Access Transportation program is a \$33 million business that employs over 1,000 people, which contributes to the economic health of the community.

- **Reduces stereotypes about aging and disability**

Brenda Durbin of Clackamas County Social Services in Oregon said, "I think paratransit enables communities to remain diverse in income level and age and ability level, because it enables people to stay in their homes where they have lived for twenty or thirty years." Similarly, Al Abeson, past Executive Director of Easter Seals Project ACTION, observed that when people with disabilities have access to mobility, they can truly contribute to educating society about the variability of the human condition.

- **Provides respite for caregivers**

"Paratransit services let people function independently of the family member who would otherwise have the task of taking them to the doctor and the grocery store and elsewhere. These [caregiver family members] have the chance to earn a stable income because they're not absent from work! So the caregivers are in a particularly vital position. Helping them helps everyone."

- Jon Burkhardt, Senior Study Director, WESTAT

- **Paratransit has “option value”**

The option value of paratransit is the value of paratransit for someone who does not have a disability or is not yet an older adult, but might need paratransit in the future, according to David Lewis, Senior Vice President, National Director Financial and Economics, HDR, Inc., Washington, D.C. Option value exists for paratransit because people can envision a time when an older relative, or they themselves, will no longer be able to drive. They can also envision when a friend or colleague who has a disability will not be able to attend a social event or other function or activity without accessible door-to-door transportation service. The very existence of the coverage provides a certain level of comfort about the future.

- **Paratransit has “existence value”**

Lewis also noted that people are willing to pay to live in a community in which certain services, rights, and privileges are protected or provided. Willingness to pay for these benefits is referred to as existence value. For example, most people are willing to pay for police and fire protection, and they will allow their federal taxes to support services in communities that may not result in a direct benefit to them. In the same sense, the community is willing to pay to ensure that a society exists in which door-to-door paratransit service is provided for people with disabilities, older adults, and others.

### **What is the Cost to the Community if Paratransit is Not Available?**

- **Lost employment**

If paratransit were not available, employment opportunities for many people with disabilities would be severely limited. One survey indicated that between 45-50% of people with disabilities said they wanted to work, but could not because transportation was not available.<sup>ii</sup> When a significant portion of the community is restricted from reaching employment, the economy is weakened.

- **Higher social welfare costs, including increased use of emergency rooms, and medical institutionalization**

People may defer visits to a doctor because transportation is not available or they are uninformed about transportation options. A lack of awareness may increase emergency room visits and use of ambulance services. Limited paratransit availability in rural areas combined with distances to medical facilities and stores forces many elderly and people with disabilities to live in an institution. Wendy Klancher, Senior Transportation Planner at the Department of Transportation Planning at the Metropolitan Washington (DC) Council of Governments, states, “There would be higher institutional and medical costs without paratransit.”

- **Loss of cross-sector savings**

Transportation serves as a connector to all other services and activities in the community. It is expensive to provide home-based services to the elderly and people with disabilities because they do not have the mobility to access less-costly services in centralized locations. A balanced network of transportation health and social service options allows for efficient use of public resources. Cross-sector savings include, for

example, reduced costs of home-delivered services when people can get to community-based meal and medical service programs.

- **Increased isolation and depression from lack of mobility**

Paratransit services provide rides to some people who simply cannot reach their destinations without the service. Without paratransit, isolation would result in increased depression among those who have limited access to civic life, as well as a perpetuation of disability and age-based discrimination. When the community has little exposure to the elderly or to people with disabilities, the unfamiliarity can breathe life into negative stereotypes and judgments, fear, and discrimination.

Dr. Sandra Rosenbloom, Professor of Planning at the University of Arizona, notes, “A diverse community is a healthy community, one where people with different talents and abilities interact.” Loss of the contribution to the community by people with disabilities or older adults reduces the strength of that community and weakens its capacity to thrive.

<sup>i</sup> Using Public Transportation to Reduce the Economic, Social, and Human Costs of Personal Immobility: TCRP Report 49, Prepared by Crain & Associates, Ricardo Byrd and Omniversed International for TCRP and TRB (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999).

<sup>ii</sup> Survey conducted by Access Transportation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.