

The Changing Paradigm for Paratransit FACT SHEET #3

Models that Point the Way Ahead for Paratransit

Public transportation should be a streamlined, coordinated, accessible transportation system that includes a continuum of specialized services that meet individual mobility needs. This vision specifies high-quality public transportation that is available to everyone and that offers comfortable, reliable and convenient services from which they can choose. The following are examples:

- **Moving a Transit Agency and a Transit Association toward Embracing Paratransit in Dallas, Texas**

The Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART)'s experience demonstrates that a large urban transit agency can make a decision to give full credence to paratransit in its operational model, in terms of management status and other internal measures that have been lacking in many locations.

Victor Burke, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, said, "Paratransit at DART is on an equal footing with every other mode we have. That's not how it used to be. When I first came to DART, paratransit was a section, not a division, under Operations. They didn't have much status within the organization. It was called HandiRide. What does that even mean? We made it a self-sustaining, self-supporting department called Paratransit Services. The department is headed by a vice-president, not just a manager. People sometimes don't want to change. But now, if you look at everything that comes out of DART, you see that paratransit vehicle somewhere! Now it's a natural thing for us."

- **Toward a Universal Transit System in Portland, Oregon**

Julie Wilcke is the mobility manager for Ride Connection, a program that coordinates rides through 30 service providers and provides services directly in two areas. Wilcke explained that TriMet, the fixed route transit authority, supports all types of transportation providers in the region, including a variety of community-based and neighborhood service providers. Riders who need it receive service from community organizations, often in their neighborhood. These services are coordinated through Ride Connection.

Wilcke pointed out that, “These groups know their clients and areas better than we would.” Due in part to volunteer drivers, cost per ride is a little over \$12 rather than the \$26 for an ADA paratransit ride. Close collaboration between all these organizations “...develops solutions that go beyond the ADA and leverages more dollars to expand capacity in our region. We have centralized information and referral to look for what is the best mode for each trip for a customer.”

- **Using Fixed Route to Enhance Paratransit in Eugene, Oregon**

Lane Transit District (LTD) in Eugene, Oregon, has shown just how accessible the fixed route service can be and demonstrates the philosophy that fixed route public transportation service is itself an important part of the paratransit program.

LTD supports riders with disabilities and older adults on public transportation in many ways, including:

- All bus stops have square bus stop poles, making the stops detectable by people with visual impairments. These are the only square poles used in the community.
- A Transit Host and Training program provides support for people who are able to use the fixed route service if there's someone at the key stations to help them with transfers. The hosts are present from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. every weekday, aiding riders with transfers all day. Each of these riders would be using paratransit if the hosts were not available to assist.

Another important aspect of the future vision is equalizing the pay between paratransit drivers and fixed route drivers as a way to address significant operational problems.

- **Equalizing Driver Salaries in Wenatchee, Washington**

Link Transit in Wenatchee, Washington has more than 10 years of experience with equalizing driver pay. Richard DeRock, who became general manager in 2002, described what happened:

“Here at Link, the agency decided in 1995 to bring its paratransit operation in house. The Link Board decided that the operators [drivers] would be fully integrated into the Link operation and that full wage parity would be provided The operators can choose to drive exclusively paratransit, exclusively fixed route, or a combination based on their seniority ... Most of the operators regularly choose back and forth between paratransit and fixed route. Nearly all [of them] drive paratransit at least two months each year.”

What are the results? DeRock stated, “Our turnover rate is very low, yet consistent, between paratransit and fixed route. Our average operator has driven for 10 years, as opposed to most [ADA] paratransit systems that have turnover around 50% per year. This longevity has resulted in very skilled drivers who rarely get lost, know nearly all of their passengers, and operate at very high productivity—3.9 ADA passengers per hour. This compares to an industry average that is around 1.8 passengers per hour. In addition, by having the drivers operate both paratransit and fixed route, efforts to

move paratransit riders to fixed route have been much more successful. The passengers seem to be more willing when they know that the big bus operator is someone who has transported them on paratransit.”ⁱ

Good coordination programs can bring important services to rural areas, and use Medicaid dollars to increase paratransit capacity in a way that represents a "win-win" situation for all stakeholders.

- **A Single Agency Providing Multiple Programs for Eleven Counties in Ottumwa, Iowa**

Pam Ward, Transit Administrator for the Ottumwa Transit Authority in Ottumwa, Iowa, described how the 11 counties around Ottumwa—which cover 5,500 square miles—came together and requested that the Ottumwa authority agency coordinate and provide most of their transportation programs. Among the agency’s multiple programs and funding streams are: Area Agencies on Aging, Head Start, Medicaid, JARC (Job Access and Reverse Commute), ADA paratransit, school districts, and contracts with particular businesses and towns. In order to access any of these services, riders make one call using an 800 number.

- **Using Medicaid Dollars to Increase Capacity in Portland, Maine**

Jon McNulty is the Executive Director of the Regional Transportation Program (RTP) based in Portland, Maine. The RTP is the ADA paratransit provider for several fixed route bus systems in the Portland area. Under RTP’s Medicaid program, eligible individuals come once a month to get a free pass for using one of the bus systems for medical or psychiatric services (a minimum number of appointments is required). “We buy the passes and distribute them,” he explained. “The fixed route systems send us a bill; we pay them and bill the Medicaid program. It’s great for the clients, because if they meet the qualifications, they have free transportation. The two systems cover about anywhere you could possibly go in our geographic area. It gets people off the paratransit and onto the fixed route system, and the fixed route system’s ridership goes up. The state wins because it saves a lot of money, reimbursing us only the cost of half of what a paratransit ride would be. It’s a great example of everyone working together: the fixed route systems, the Medicaid program, the clients, and us.”

ⁱ National Council on Disability, The Current State of Transportation for People with Disabilities in the United States (Washington, DC: 2005) 85-86.