



Accessibility Advisory Committee

Meeting Minutes: May 20, 2019

Attendees

Present: Paul Semelfort (Chair), Denise Rush (Vice-Chair), Darnise Bush, Charlie Crawford, Phil Posner, and Patrick Sheehan.

Call to Order

Chair Semelfort called the MetroAccess Subcommittee meeting to order at 4:00pm and started with introductions of the Committee members, staff, and customers.

Review of Agenda & Minutes from Prior Meeting

The Meeting Agenda was approved.

The Minutes from the prior meeting were approved as written.

Customer Service & Outreach Reports

Carlton Brown, Quality Assurance, MTM, stated that the public comments were reviewed, and customers were contacted.

David Shaffer, Ombudsman, Office of the ADA Policy and Planning, provided the Outreach Report. He spoke at the Alexandria Public Library with persons with visual impairment and provided information about MetroAccess, Metrobus, and Metrorail.

Michael Wilson Award and Rush Award

Michael Wilson Award:

Michael Rademacher, Project Manager, MV Transportation, presented the award to Fendi Mercedes, Quality Assurance (QA) Specialist, Operations Control Center (OCC). Ms. Mercedes joined in October 2015 and was promoted to QA in 2016. She is a subject matter expert and a "go-to" person. Ms. Mercedes loves helping MetroAccess customers find resolution to their complaints and improve the overall customer experience.

Rush Award:

There was no recipient for the Rush Award this month.

Dr. Posner stated when customers are told their ride is outside, but it is not, there is no easy way to call the Where is My Ride (WMR) Office to inform and get status of the ride.

MetroAccess Scheduling Window - Upcoming Changes

Christiaan Blake, Managing Director, Access Services (ACCS), provided an update on the upcoming changes about the MetroAccess Scheduling Window. As a follow-up from the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) Meeting of May 6th, 2019, Mr. Blake explained MetroAccess scheduling terms: pick-up request time, scheduling window, pick-up time,

pick-up window, appointment time, and fare calculation. The proposed changes for the scheduling-window is as follows:

MetroAccess uses a 1-hour scheduling window, (30 minutes before thru 30 minutes after the pick-up request time). The ADA allows for a 2-hour scheduling window, (1-hour before thru 1-hour after the pick-up request time). MetroAccess will begin using a 90-minute window on July 1st instead of June 1st, as recommended by the AAC.

Also, as recommended by the AAC, the proposed change will be called a "Pilot". The pilot will run from July 1, 2019 until June 30, 2020. Following periodic reviews during the Pilot period, MetroAccess will consider using the full ADA 2-hour scheduling window beginning July 1, 2020.

Regarding the fare calculation, Mr. Blake amended his statement made during the May Accessibility Advisory Committee meeting regarding expanding the Fare Calculator window. He read the current policy from the MetroAccess Customer Guide, under the Fares and Service Area section, "MetroAccess fares are two times the fastest comparable fixed-route fare, with a maximum fare of \$6.50. The lowest available fare 15 minutes before and 15 minutes after the requested pick-up time will be provided during the booking process." Thus, the Fare Calculator uses a 30-minute window around the pick-up request time to find the lowest fare. For the year 1 Pilot period, this policy will not change, therefore no impact to the customer fare will result from the expanded scheduling window.

Mr. Blake stated there are no other proposed changes to the pick-up request time, pick-up time, pick-up window, appointment time, and no impact on MetroAccess fares. There is a new commitment for trips booked by appointment time. MetroAccess is already determined to arrive before the appointment time, however MetroAccess is now adding the commitment not to drop off a customer more than 30 minutes prior to the appointment time. Mr. Blake invited questions at this time.

Dr. Posner shared a recent experience. He made 5 calls to book a trip and experienced that the window time got worse with each call. Dr. Posner stated seems like the service is being cut, and as a result the performance will drop. Mr. Blake stated the move to a wider scheduling window is a way to improve the on-time performance for all customers. Dr. Posner stated his concern is that people may not reach their destinations in a timely manner. Mr. Blake stated customers may want to opt for trips by appointment time and to have subscription trips for their regularly traveled trips.

Ms. Rush asked how the information about upcoming changes will be made public? As a customer, she has had to call the reservations office several times before getting a suitable time. She is used to the 5:30am to 6:00am pick-up time and gets to work at 7:05am. For a pick up at 5:00am, she will get to work at 5:30am, 90 minutes before her work schedule. Mr. Blake stated we are going to take this extra time (the month of June) to inform customers. He stated that the AAC has recommended seat drops, and that staff

will follow that recommendation. Customers who have taken trips recently will get calls and notifications.

Mr. Blake recommended that Ms. Rush consider booking her trips by appointment time and to get on a subscription. Ms. Rush stated when she calls MetroAccess, she gets to talk to employees and is able to evaluate their customer service. With subscription, she will not have an opportunity to talk with employees. Her schedule changes and that will make it difficult for her to have a subscription.

Ms. Bush stated sometimes she travels with an aide and other times she may travel alone. Mr. Blake stated that whether she travels with an aide or alone, the subscription will not be affected. There have been times when customers booked trips traveling with an aide and a companion, however, the end up traveling alone. In these instances, going forward, drivers will be instructed to inform the OCC of the extra capacity, and trip insertions will be allowed on that route. The aim is to utilize vehicle resources to the maximum.

A customer stated the trips can be booked either by appointment time or pick-up time, but not both. Sometimes a customer can be dropped off too early from the appointment time. The customer also mentioned about differences of fares for various trips and length of trips. Mr. Blake asked for the customer to provide specific information about her concerns, for further review. Mr. Blake also said with the new commitment, customers will not be dropped off any earlier than 30 minutes prior to the appointment time.

Another customer stated MetroAccess trips get too long (going in different directions) and that MetroAccess is getting more money for longer trips. If a customer needs to use a restroom then instead of being able to make a stop, options are either stay on the vehicle or go back to the pick-up location. Mr. Blake stated routing is under constant review.

MetroAccess Refund Policy: Taxi/Alternate Rides

Chair Semelfort provided an example of his ride from Saturday, where he would have waited for a ride at least 90 minutes past his window. Instead of waiting that long, he opted to make alternate ride arrangements. Chair Semelfort provided information about the re-imbursement program that is in place in the New York City. In a scenario that he described from Saturday, a MetroAccess customer would be allowed to call for an alternate ride and be reimbursed for the difference of fare with proper documentation.

Dr. Posner stated WMATA could use an alternate MetroAccess vehicle or the Abilities-Ride vehicle. If those two fail in providing rides, then customers may have the ability to call for other transportation and seek reimbursement for the difference of fare. Ms. Rush stated she has been riding for 20 years and knows that customers will not get money from Metro. In that case, will they get credit on the EZ Pay account?

Mr. Blake stated the Abilities-Ride is being established as an alternative. There have been 2 instances where ACCS has facilitated Abilities-Ride trips in fulfillment of the MetroAccess No Strand Policy. Currently, the Abilities-Ride trips are extremely limited and available with either pick-up or drop-off in Maryland. We hope to have an announcement about the new Abilities-Ride providers by the time of the AAC Meeting in June. Mr. Blake stated with the expansion of the Abilities-Ride program, the OCC may have the capability of utilizing the Abilities-Ride vehicles for the reimbursement program.

Chair Semelfort shared his experience about attempting to book a trip between Herndon, Virginia (VA) and Prince George's County, Maryland (MD). Chair Semelfort stated in past MetroAccess has utilized taxi services for MetroAccess trips. Mr. Blake stated that is still a practice; if a trip cannot be placed on another MetroAccess vehicle, a taxi will be utilized. On Saturday, the issue may have been because of the system issues. Mr. Rademacher clarified that MetroAccess pre-schedules 4% of the trips on taxis and moves trips to taxis during the course of the day as needed.

Mr. Blake stated he has heard about the Cleveland model and the New York model, however, would first like to see how the service improves with the expansion of Abilities-Ride before moving forward with a reimbursement program.

A customer asked if MetroAccess also provides rides on Uber and Lyft? Dr. Posner clarified that the customer may be referring to the late-night trips where Metro provides subsidy of \$6.00. Chair Semelfort further explained that if a customer uses a cab at night, Metro pays \$6.00 and the customer pays the balance.

Chair Semelfort asked if the taxi re-imbusement process proceeds, and if Metro opts for not providing cash re-imbusement, would customers receive credit on their MetroAccess EZ Pay accounts? Mr. Blake stated the Committee can/should continue to advocate for reimbursement, but he also wants to proceed with the expansion of Abilities-Ride and see how the service improves.

Training for Abilities – Ride Providers (Requirements)

Chair Semelfort stated he received a call from a supervisor from one of the Abilities-Ride providers, asking him if knows of anyone to provide training. That was very concerning to him to get that call, especially when they should have the training in place prior to getting the contract and drivers should know how to secure wheelchairs aboard vehicles. Chair Semelfort had also provided Carolyn Bellamy's name as a trainer.

Mr. Blake stated that when the providers attended a previous MAS meeting, Chair Semelfort volunteered his services to be the point of contact for providing training for them to improve their respective services. Mr. Blake added that he is not concerned that they would call upon the Chair, but happy to hear they are reaching out and keeping a commitment. They have met the contractual requirements but appear to be trying to improve their services. Mr. Blake stated the MetroAccess staff provides good training,

however, he has found another training resource that he has shared with the providers. Mr. Blake has shared information about the resource with the Abilities-Ride providers and with the Transport DC providers.

Chair Semelfort asked if there is a requirement or suggestion in the contract that drivers should know how to secure people with mobility devices? Mr. Blake stated he does not recall if there is any specific language on specific requirements about securing mobility devices. Unlike the MetroAccess fleet, the cab companies have a variety of vehicles and it will be very difficult to specify specific securments in a contract.

Ms. Rush stated there is a need to add specific language about it and drivers should know how to secure wheelchairs aboard the vehicle.

A customer stated, as per the Customer-Guide, customers need to know how to operate their own mobility device, and asked if there is any specific language for the Abilities-Ride? Mr. Blake stated he does not think there is any specific language to that affect.

Mr. Sheehan asked are we asking to see what language is in the existing contract to see if it needs to be modified. Chair Semelfort stated in this case, the request for procurement (RFP) and that securing wheelchairs is a safety matter.

Mr. Blake stated he would review the language and then discuss with current and future providers. Mr. Crawford stated regarding the wheelchair securement, that has to be defined.

MetroAccess Trip Time: Customer Education Process

Mr. Blake stated MetroAccess trip time is a part of the change that you are experiencing on MetroAccess. The goal is to pick-up the customer on time and get them to destination on time. This is a public transportation, fixed route equivalent, shared-ride service. We have so many people to serve and everybody deserves a chance to utilize the service. Ms. Rush stated we have not heard the terminology you are using "public transportation" before. We are now running the "Christiaan Blake service". When customers become eligible and get their MetroAccess ID, that is where they need to be informed. Until recently, she did not understand that the MetroAccess ride time is equivalent to fixed route. Customers need to be informed. When customers get cars for MetroAccess rides, the assumption can be that the ride is equivalent to a personal car ride, and not equivalent to fixed route service.

Mr. Blake stated Antoine Johnson, Operations Manager, Eligibility, is here and is hearing the recommendations. In the last 6 to 7 months, the message is getting out to more customers, but he agreed with Ms. Rush that there needs to be a massive educational plan. The business plan was written 26 years ago, and changes have taken place. Since the final publication of the Customer Guide has been delayed, Mr. Blake would like to review it and add some language in it.

Other Items

Mr. Sheehan stated the starting date (July 1st) of the scheduling window pilot is not a good time as Blue and Yellow lines shutdown will be in effect at that time. The 5-week duration to inform 45,000 MetroAccess customers about the scheduling window pilot is not sufficient. Mr. Sheehan also stated that for MetroAccess, we talk about comparisons to the fixed route service, however, he does not see any on-time performance, reimbursements, nor any passes, that he sees on Metrorail. If MetroAccess is comparable to the fixed routes, then we need to have the benefits of the fixed route.

Mr. Blake stated per the ADA, paratransit was always designed to be a safety net not a primary option. Our goal is not to encourage ridership, the goal is to ensure the public transit system we have is more accessible, encourage people with disability the freedom and flexibility on the nation's finest system. In terms of refunds, MetroAccess has had late trip credits long before rail and bus did. Even though it was a result of a lawsuit, the late trip credits could have been removed at-least 3 years ago. We are continuing because the AAC has led the way.

Dr. Posner stated your contract is road hours. The most direct trips (pick-up and drop-off) will be most beneficial. There needs to be a limit on number of people to be picked up and dropped off. The customers should be enticed to schedule subscription trips. For example, give one free trip after 10 subscription trips.

Public Comment

A customer stated that on Saturday, she had trouble getting through the WMR office. She did not know where her ride was and could not speak with a dispatcher either. Mr. Blake stated MetroAccess experienced some computer issues on Saturday, and in addition Verizon had region-wide line issues, which caused problems for MetroAccess customers trying to reach the OCC. He added that the WMR office does not close, and that MetroAccess will not strand customers.

A second customer stated last Saturday her concern was not only about the system going down, but her ride was also scheduled incorrectly. Instead of picking her up from a location to take her home, the ride went to her home for pick-up. When customer reached home, she found a message from MetroAccess stating her ride was there. At another time, she was taken past her location and was in the vehicle for 2 hours. Additionally, MetroAccess calls her at home phone number, but not on the phone number that she provides at the time of the reservation. Mr. Blake expressed concerns about the wrong pick-up location report and about the customer being called at home, when the pick-up was a different destination. On ride time he stated if we arrived and picked-up and dropped-off a customer safely and on-time, we have done our job if the ride time was equal to or less than the fixed route equivalency time.

A third customer stated his concern about a bus operator on the D8 route who was yelling at the customers. Everyone was scared, and he ended up leaving the bus. Mr. Shaffer will review it further.

A fourth customer provided his concerns to staff and left before the Public Comment. Mr. Brown will follow up with him.

A fifth customer stated he had provided a bus operator's number and had asked for the employee to be present in the meeting, so that he could confront him. Mr. Blake stated all complaints have a protocol to follow. Employees will not be brought to the meetings for them to be questioned. Divisions have established investigation process.

A sixth customer stated when she travels on MetroAccess with a cart, the drivers say it looks like a cart, but it works like a rollator for her. Mr. Blake asked for the customer to provide specifics of the incident and the matter will be reviewed.

A seventh customer read a letter that included concerns about MetroAccess fares, fare calculation, adequate service, and recommended reasonable modifications in policies and procedures. Mr. Blake stated customer will be followed up about her concerns. The letter will be sent to the Committee in an accessible format.

An eighth customer stated MetroAccess drivers refuse to come inside the door to help customers. She also talked about shared ride issues. The inability to have rides scheduled as a pick-up time and an appointment-time should be reviewed. Mr. Blake stated a follow up will be done about customer's concern.

Ms. Bush stated her concerns: when a customer is in the vehicle for a long time and has a need to use the restroom, drivers have to ask for permission to make a stop. With the 2-hour scheduling window, that will make the situation worse. She also asked how the subscription trips would be affected as there are times she travels with an aide and sometimes alone, sometimes she uses a scooter, but not all the times. Mr. Blake stated the subscription trips should be based on fixed route equivalent time and does not get affected whether she travels with an aide or with her scooter. If the information is in her subscription, that does not affect her trips when she opts to travel by herself.

Ms. Bush provided a scenario where another MetroAccess customer had poor balance and the driver could not physically assist him. The public should be educated on rules and the level of assistance that can be provided by the drivers. Chair Semelfort stated educating the public will be on the work-plan for next year.

Meeting adjourned at 6:00pm.