



# AAC

## Accessibility Advisory Committee

### **MetroAccess Subcommittee Meeting Minutes: November 18, 2019**

#### **Attendees**

Present: Paul Semelfort (Chair), Denise Rush (Vice-Chair), Darnise Bush, Vanessa Coles, Rico Dancy, Melanie Jackson, Mary Kay McMahon, Philippa Mezile, Doris Ray, Patrick Sheehan, and Phil Posner (Remote Participation).

#### **Call to Order**

Chair Semelfort called the MetroAccess Subcommittee (MAS) meeting to order at 4:00 pm.

Chair Semelfort started with introductions of the Committee members, staff, and customers.

#### **Approval of Agenda and Prior Meeting Minutes:**

The meeting agenda was approved as amended.

The topic of Abilities-Ride Providers Update was moved up, followed by the MetroAccess GPS/Ranger System Update, then the topic of Shared-Ride: Incorporate Guidelines for Excessive Time.

The October 21, 2019 Meeting Minutes were approved as written.

#### **Customer Service & Outreach Reports:**

*Customer Service:* Carlton Brown, MTM, stated the public commenters from last month's meeting have been contacted with regards to their feedback.

*Outreach Report:* David Shaffer, Ombudsman, Office of Americans with Disabilities Act Policy and Planning (ADAP), did not have any outreach activities to be reported.

#### **Michael Wilson and Rush Awards:**

*Michael Wilson Award* was presented to Tracy Williams, Supervisor Reconciliation Department, MV Transportation, MetroAccess Operations Control Center. Ms. Williams is a lead reconciler overseeing the auditing of manifests for all the service-providers. She is a subject matter expert for Operations and a go-to person for the handling of billing, auditing, policies and procedures. She is a valuable person to MV Transportation.

*Rush Award* was presented to Bernard Savoy. Chair Semelfort read a brief bio: Mr. Savoy has been working with MetroAccess since 2012. He is a valuable team player and a stellar operator who maintains a positive attitude. Mr. Savoy enjoys serving the MetroAccess community and helping customers. Ms. Rush stated Mr. Savoy's name was referred by Elois Ross and it is not easy to please her, thus he well deserves the Award.

#### **Abilities-Ride Providers Update:**

Christiaan Blake, Managing Director, Access Services, provided an update regarding the Abilities-Ride providers. Old Dominion Taxi company has been added to provide the Abilities-Ride service in Virginia. The confirmation of additional companies is awaited. Thus far, the number of Abilities-Ride service providers is as follows: one in Prince George's County (Silver Cab), two in Montgomery County (Regency and Action Taxi), one in Virginia (Old Dominion Taxi), three in the District of Columbia (Yellow Cab, District Cab, and Curb). Via Transportation will be added to provide service in the District of Columbia and they will be providing door-to-door service. Via Transportation will be invited to an AAC meeting and introduced when they become an official Abilities-Ride service-provider. Two other companies are expected to be finalized by the Procurement department. There are dozens of independent taxi drivers in Prince George's County and we have requested that Curb identify them and include them in the network.

Chair Semelfort inquired if Falcon and BBC were still part of the Abilities-Ride program, as mentioned in prior meetings. Mr. Blake stated those companies are van providers and are a part of the Abilities-Ride program. They specifically provide service to individuals traveling to and from Human Services and to individuals with intellectual disabilities going to and from day programs. Chair Semelfort stated the DC Council had an issue with Via as they serviced only the northwest part of the city, then asked if they are going to service the entire District of Columbia. Mr. Blake stated under the Abilities-Ride program, the communication that they should be able to service the entire District of Columbia is underway with Via. Mr. Blake has also asked them to consider serving Prince George's County. While the procurement department completes their paperwork, Via is working to get additional drivers to have the capacity to work in various areas.

Chair Semelfort asked if Old Dominion Taxi is call-in or app-based provider. Mr. Blake stated each of the taxi providers are going to offer apps, as well as call-in phone numbers. When the service opens for all the providers, they all will accept phone reservations. The transportation network-based companies (TNC) cannot assure whether they are going to accept telephone-based reservations. Chair Semelfort inquired if Curb and Via would accept telephone reservations. Mr. Blake responded that the two companies might not accept telephone reservations. Chair Semelfort asked if the promotion will renew for another year. Mr. Blake stated the procurement paperwork is still on going and the current promotion will continue until the paperwork is complete. Afterwards, the promotion is going to change, and that information will be shared soon. The customers on the current promotion will receive a notice four weeks before it ends.

Ms. Bush asked about the TNC model, if the providers will provide door-to-door service, and if phone reservation was a requirement. Mr. Blake stated the TNC is a vernacular for a technology company, not a transportation company. The door-to-door service is not an ADA requirement and only one company that signed-up will perform door-to-door service. The companies had to meet very specific requirements, but the phone reservation was not one of the requirements. Mr. Blake stated he would like to believe that the companies would have offered phone option, as it is a traditional way of providing service. Ms. Mezile asked if customers would be able to call a provider directly or through a centralized phone system. Mr. Blake stated customers would call the companies directly and choose their

provider. For example, a cab company can pick you up in the District and take you to Maryland, and another cab company can be used to bring you back.

Ms. Rush asked how would a customer book trips for Abilities-Ride. Mr. Blake stated he is booking the Abilities-Ride trips at this time. When the entire expansion is launched at one-time, customers would contact the companies directly. Abilities-Ride showcases will be held in all jurisdictions and information about the providers will be shared at that time. Ms. Rush shared an experience of a cab driver who told her he was not her aide and left, however within five minutes she had three other cabs arrive to pick her up. She asked what level of assistance customers should expect from the drivers. Ms. Rush added that she has been picked up and dropped off on-time every day for three weeks using the Abilities-Ride service. Mr. Blake stated he cannot guarantee that every experience will be a great one however, we are working with management of the companies to improve services. Mr. Blake stated that if the company leadership does not hold their staff accountable for poor service, there are other ways outside of the company to do so.

Regarding service received from the drivers of the cab companies that are providing the Abilities-Ride service, Chair Semelfort stated he hopes Mr. Blake would emphasize that the drivers are trained and know how to secure a customer using a wheelchair. A customer stated her concern about the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAV) currently available causing an additional workload by the Abilities-Ride. She provided an example of a company that serves the Prince George's County, whose grant was pulled due to inadequate service. Mr. Blake stated it becomes a matter of determining a balance for transportation companies. *The meeting was briefly interrupted due to technical difficulties.* Since the customer is a resident of the District of Columbia and user of the Transport DC program, she explained how to get a different service-provider when using that service.

#### **MetroAccess GPS/Ranger System Update:**

Terrian Williams-Hall, Director, MetroAccess, stated we are in the process of securing 25 devices as a replacement for the Rangers. There will be a pilot of 90 days to determine if this new tool would be an adequate replacement. At the same time, the Rangers are being updated by the real-time-traffic company and Trapeze (the parent company that provides the Ranger devices) to see where the errors are in order to resolve the current issues. Ms. Rush stated Ms. Williams-Hall and the Operations Manager have been on the afternoon rides with her and have experienced the issues first hand. However, she is now experiencing Ranger problems in the mornings while going to work due to it providing incorrect directions to the drivers. Chair Semelfort shared his experience with the Ranger's issues and stated he has had to guide the drivers on several occasions. Ms. Bush stated the Rangers provide inaccurate directions and drivers are hesitant in following directions provided by the customers.

Ms. Williams-Hall stated she is aware of the Ranger issues and hopes to have the new devices for the pilot in the next couple of months; granted the procurement process does not become a road block. We will have 25 to 30 devices for the pilot, which will be installed in the vehicles. Feedback from the pilot will be collected for 60 days. If the devices work

correctly, we will upfit the remaining fleet with them. The new device is a commercial grade tablet that connects directly to Google Maps, reads directly from the manifest, loads information into Google maps, and provides directions to the drivers. Chair Semelfort stated any type of a change is good. A customer stated she was informed that the drivers are prohibited from taking directions from the customers. Ms. Williams-Hall stated some of our customers are unable to provide directions due to their situations. We advise the drivers to use their best judgement and take guidance from customers if they felt confident of getting correct directions.

Another customer stated that there are times when drivers will argue with him and will not accept the directions provided to them. Ms. Williams-Hall stated it is at the discretion of the driver whether to follow the directions provided by the customer. Ms. Rush asked if new drivers are being trained to not listen to the customer or even ask for directions. She also stated that new drivers seem to have an attitude. Ms. Williams-Hall stated the drivers are not trained to ask for directions; our practice is to rely on the rangers. If the customer offers directions and the drivers feel confident to accept the offer, they can use the directions that the customer provides. Ms. Ray asked how the communication regarding inaccurate directions is handled between a deaf or hard of hearing customer and the driver, or, are the deaf customers ignored. Ms. Williams-Hall stated we hope that no customer is ever ignored but our drivers also need to keep their eyes on the road.

Ms. Williams-Hall clarified the question: how a hearing-impaired customer notifies the driver when the driver is going in wrong direction. Mr. Dancy stated he does not appreciate the word hearing-impaired, he is deaf, and he only uses deaf. It is very offensive for him. Ms. Williams-Hall apologized for her choice of word and will use deaf going forward. Pierre Montebello, Challenger, stated we never had that issue with the drivers and regarding directions, we do not train drivers to request directions from customers. Ms. Ray asked how would the drivers communicate with deaf persons? Ms. Williams-Hall stated there are writing tools: tablets and pens, available on the vehicles so that if someone needs to write a message to the driver, it is accessible to them. Ms. Ray inquired if the drivers are instructed or trained to do that. Mr. Montebello confirmed that drivers are trained to offer paper and pen or call the Operating Control Center (OCC), if needed.

Ms. Coles inquired if the customer profile includes information about the person's disability on the manifest. Ms. Williams-Hall stated the information is there however, it may not be easily available due to the Ranger space, however, the driver can call the OCC and get that information. Mr. Dancy stated he does not understand the problem, paper and pen should be available on all vehicles. Ms. Williams-Hall stated paper and pen are available on all vehicles. Mr. Blake stated there is a traditional mode of communication mechanism between the customer and the driver. Ms. Ray stated her question was, for a deaf or hard of hearing customer, or a deaf-blind person, what actions will the driver take if the customer is clearly trying to communicate something. The customer might not be able to clearly communicate to the driver verbally, therefore is the driver trained to take automatic action to offer a pen and paper or some other response.

Mr. Blake stated, regarding deaf or hard of hearing customers, our drivers are not trained in sign language, however there is pen and paper to communicate on all the vehicles. Many of the deaf blind customers travel with a personal care attendant (PCA). Mr. Dancy stated the term is Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI). Mr. Blake stated in general, all the drivers have some way to communicate with customers with various disabilities. A customer stated the new drivers are afraid of being fired if they do not follow the Ranger. Mr. Blake stated he may consider for allowing drivers to use their discretion if they make the right communication. The idea of drivers just following directions provided by a customer is a very dangerous precedent, and safety is first. If a driver was to have permission to listen to a customer, he or she would have to pull over and call the OCC. We would create a policy that ensures customer safety as the priority.

**Shared-Ride: Incorporate guidelines for excessive time:**

Mr. Blake stated for MetroAccess rides, he uses the five steps of success: (1) was the customer picked up on-time, (2) did the customer get a progressive ride, (3) if a trip is booked as per an appointment-time, was the customer dropped off in a timely manner, (4) did the trip exceed the fixed route time, (5) and was the trip safe? Mr. Blake explained a progressive route does not mean non-stop, it does not mean that a customer could not wait for another customer's pick-up window to open. We are moving to a shared-ride public transit. Ms. Bush stated she is a member of the pilot program and she appreciates the pre-arrival calls. She shared information about a ride which had a second customer's pick-up window starting 30 minutes after the driver reached that customer's pick-up location. When driver contacted the OCC, it took 15 minutes for them to respond.

Ms. Rush shared a similar incident where she was picked up and the driver went to pick up a second customer whose pick-up window did not open for 20 minutes after reaching the location. As a result, her trip surpassed the comparable fixed route duration. Ms. Ray stated she understands the point of comparable trip, however when a customer books a trip as per appointment-time, that makes it a priority that the customer should reach the destination by the appointment-time, it is about the routing and scheduling. Ms. Ray also stated as a bus rider she notices that while in route, the bus operators sometimes must idle for schedule adjustments. She wondered if MetroAccess must do something similar? Mr. Blake responded to the comments of Ms. Rush and Ms. Ray. Mr. Blake stated he spoke with Ms. Rush and that trip had scheduling and reservation issues. For Ms. Ray's comments, he provided an example of a fixed route from Greenbelt to Chinatown which may take 45 minutes on a constantly moving train. Customers getting on a MetroAccess vehicle, where the driver must stop, wait, and pick up other customers, and still gets to Chinatown in 45 minutes, that is considered a good trip. On the other hand, if the OCC sees a vehicle dwelling for some time, they should adjust the trips. Our team should do a better job of scheduling and adjusting the trips.

**Public Comments:**

A customer stated if Uber and Lyft can provide service in a few minutes, why can't MetroAccess do it? She knows it is a shared-ride but who is scheduling the trips? She lives about 20 minutes away from the dialysis center where she goes for treatment and is due at 6 am but arrives at 6:30am. Mr. Blake stated Ms. Rush has had good

experiences on the Abilities-Ride. He still needs to improve MetroAccess service, however he would like for the customer to try the Abilities-Ride for her dialysis trips.

The second customer stated Mr. Blake provided him with a cab ride last meeting and he reached home quickly. The customer asked about an alternative coming from Virginia to the District of Columbia. Mr. Blake stated we are working on getting more alternatives. For now, the customer would have to call him to get the trips until all the providers are open to the customers.

The third customer stated an issue that she had reported in the last meeting and it occurred again that a driver asked her to walk across the street for her pick-up. The customer reported another incident about a ride that arrived extremely late and about the communication between her and the Where is My Ride (WMR) Office. Mr. Blake stated her trip would have to be reviewed and it sounds like it was a taxi that came for her pick up.

The fourth customer has written two letters of complaints and would write a third one. She stated it is uncomfortable for a woman to wait in the dark not knowing the status of a ride. The customer stated when she calls WMR, it is difficult to get connected with a dispatcher as she gets placed on a long hold followed by a disconnected line. Then she ends up calling back. The customer stated she is willing to work with MetroAccess.

The fifth customer stated she does not mind waiting for another customer, however it is not comfortable sitting in the vehicle with a male stranger for 25 minutes. Another concern was about a trip on November 13<sup>th</sup> when her ride came an hour and 45 minutes late and while waiting, she was given incorrect information by the dispatchers. Mr. Blake stated the trip would be reviewed to determine what happened on that specific trip.

The sixth customer asked why dispatchers do not inform customers of the type of vehicle assigned for the pick-up, instead they transfer the call to a supervisor. The second complaint was about a taxi that did not arrive, consequently she ended up making alternate ride arrangements. Mr. Blake stated her complaints would be reviewed. He is trying to see how vehicle information can be provided to customers. A customer present in the meeting had called WMR today and the dispatcher provided her with the vehicle information.

A seventh customer provided complaint on behalf of a deaf customer. The complaint has already been lodged about the mentioned incident and is under review.

Ms. Coles shared a ride experience when she took a MetroAccess trip, went to her destination and upon exiting the vehicle, she realized she should not have gone to that location. She tried to come home in the same vehicle that brought her to the destination, however she was informed she would have to wait. At that time, she would have had to wait for 30-minutes before a vehicle could arrive to pick her up. Ms. Rush explained there is an hour wait time for the return trips.

The eighth-customer reported concerns in a previous meeting about using the cabs. A staff member followed up on her complaint and stated the second trip was inadequately scheduled. The customer also shared her experience of a trainee and a trainer, on one of her trips. The trainee was very nice whereas the trainer was rude, and she should be getting trained herself.

**Meeting adjourned at 6:00 pm.**