



Planning a Better Normal for Paratransit

Community Volunteer Transportation Company, Peterborough, NH



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many of us to reevaluate where we go and how we get there. This is equally true for older adults and people with disabilities.

Essential trips, such as traveling to dialysis treatment, continued with adjustments for maximum safety. Trips to the senior center for lunch or to church or an adult day care program were suspended. These locations had to close, leading to increased isolation for already vulnerable populations. Services and communities that relied heavily on volunteers, as in rural areas, faced difficult demands and increased concern for the safety of volunteers. As state and local governments removed restrictions, communities have felt pressure in all areas of life to “get back to normal.” We want to take a moment to pause that impulse, reflect on ways we’ve adapted, and check in on our larger priorities.

We are more flexible than we realized.

Although some ADA-mandated paratransit trips needed to continue, in general ridership dropped by 80–90 percent—similar to fixed-route transit. Some organizations offered drivers furloughs or reduced hours; they asked them to do cleaning and other tasks outside their job descriptions. Many paratransit providers partnered with local non-profit organizations and delivered meals or groceries. Some collaborated with local public health departments and provided commute trips for healthcare workers, trips for vulnerable populations to COVID testing, and later, to large vaccination sites. This flexibility is a strength that demonstrates the ability for these services to do more, even as they return to their core transportation mission.

Communication really is key.

Some organizations that had not previously communicated with one other, such as public health departments and transportation authorities, formed connections that will improve service in the future. In one example, community groups performing wellness calls added questions about transportation to their list, then referred people to transportation programs who could enroll them over the phone. We can build on this improved communication and coordination, particularly where organizational goals overlap and opportunities for improved service present themselves.

Technology can increase access, and we should speed up its adoption.

There’s a stereotype that older adults don’t like, or are scared of, technology—or that people with disabilities can’t use or afford the most up-to-date smartphones and other devices. The reality, of course, is that the pandemic has stretched everyone to learn new ways of doing things, from ordering groceries online to holding video calls to figuring out contactless payment with a smartphone.

Paratransit programs that had required cash or tickets bought in person, or by sending a check in the mail, got a jumpstart on moving to app- and account-based systems. Individuals who would normally miss an access advisory committee meeting, logged in via Zoom from their hospital bed. Others found the immediate captioning or translation on video meetings invaluable. We need to maintain multiple channels of communication—print, phone, web, in-person, translated, or captioned—but we also need to empower individuals to use the technology available by providing training, and even devices, if need be.



Township of Schaumburg, Hoffman Estates, IL

We need to continue to think about our priorities and be willing to make changes.

As a person with a mobility disability myself, 2020 forced me to reexamine many of the things I used to do automatically. I worked hard from an office because my non-disabled colleagues did, and I had to prove I could, too. What if some of my work is done better from home? As many people in the transportation industry discuss equity, what does that mean for my work in paratransit, a more intersectional area of transportation planning? Have we done everything we can to ensure access to paratransit for older adults and people with disabilities who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color? And as a wheelchair user, do I truly have equitable access to our transportation system? Can I drive my car, hop on a bus, hail an Uber—today? Do I need to?

These are fundamental issues that can't be solved without listening to individuals with disabilities and older adults and being willing to transform our services to meet their needs. Ultimately, it's that willingness to develop creative solutions—not just to pandemic challenges, but to everyday priorities like increased equity—that should guide us toward a better normal.

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