HOW TRANSIT AGENCIES IMPLEMENT BEST PRACTICE STRATEGIES IN COMPLEMENTARY ADA PARATRANSIT ELIGIBILITY

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The IDeA Center produces knowledge and innovative tools to increase equity in design for underrepresented groups.
TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH
Full participation in society, including school, work, and other activities, requires access to effective modes of transportation for all persons, especially those with a disability.

Economic independence and self-sufficiency are possible only when transportation is accessible, affordable, and available, close to home and to the many destinations that people need to reach.

-U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2003

Funding History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed-Route Large Bus; Paratransit</th>
<th>Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Accessible Public Transportation; NIDILRR (2008-2018)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fixed-Route Large Bus; Paratransit</td>
<td>Optimizing Accessible Public Transportation; NIDILRR (2017-2020)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ridehailing</td>
<td>Improving Demand Responsive Transportation for All; Toyota Social Mobility (2018-2019)</td>
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<td>AVs/SAVs</td>
<td>RERC-APT; NIDILRR (2018-2023)</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Current Barriers
Government Accountability Office, 2012

- The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) requires agencies to self-certify compliance with ADA paratransit service requirements in order to receive funding.

- GAO conducted national study using the FTA’s ADA compliance reports, a web-based survey of 145 transit agencies, and interviews with federal officials and 20 transit agencies to identify specific actions agencies take to address changes in cost and ridership.

- To offset rising paratransit trips and costs transit agencies should:
  - Pursue more accurate eligibility determinations
  - Align paratransit service with ADA requirements
  - Offer travel training
  - Collaborate with health and human service professionals, other transportation providers
  - Improve the accessibility of fixed route service
  - And implement new technology for scheduling and dispatch

Thatcher et al., 2013

- Describes the areas of operation where public transportation agencies have implemented changes and improvements to encourage greater fixed route transit use by people with disabilities:
  - Bus stops
  - Marketing, public information, and travel training
  - Fare incentives
  - Transit service
  - ADA paratransit eligibility criteria

- These findings reinforce previous research (Hoesch and Roszner 1995; Weiner 1998, 2007; Mathias and Thatcher 2002; Welch and Dubost 2005; Rogers and Wiemiller 2006; Cross 2007; National Academies 2007; Sapper, Goodwill, and Carapella 2009; NCD 2005) illustrating the importance of agency eligibility determination practices in addressing operational challenges.
Thatcher et al., 2013 (cont.)

- Extensive literature review and a national survey of transit agencies to identify eligibility determination best practice strategies for complementary ADA paratransit providers.
  - Using in-person interviews and functional assessments
  - Establishing and enforcing measurable and specific eligibility conditions (e.g., actual weather conditions)
  - Developing efforts to improve passenger awareness about conditions of eligibility and other transportation options
  - Using detailed on-street assessments to detect path-of-travel barriers
  - Offering travel training on fixed route for conditionally eligible passengers
  - Adopting trip-by-trip eligibility and software to enforce it

- Limited to case studies and agencies did not fully document the implementation of these strategies. It did not explore the factors that contribute to implementation successes or challenges.

METHODOLOGY
Research Plan

 Overview: Interview transit agencies to investigate the use of paratransit eligibility best practices, as defined by Thatcher et al. (2013), from initial application and assessments procedures to scheduling and trip-by-trip decision making.

 Research Goals:
   Determine the extent to which transit agencies are adopting suggested best practices as part of determining the complementary ADA paratransit eligibility of customers
   Describe how agencies implement these strategies in daily operations
   Explore factors that contribute to implementation successes and challenges

Methodology

 The targeted sample included the 20 transit operators reported in a recent paratransit study (GAO 2012).

 Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted.

 For each interview question, the research team made cross-interview comparisons of participant comments, identified emergent themes, and shared interpretations via weekly meetings that occurred over a two-month period.

 Accuracy and credibility of interpretations were enhanced in two ways: (a) initial respondents had the opportunity to review transcriptions of their comments and preliminary analysis, and (b) the three coders represent diverse professional perspectives, reducing the risks for biases reflecting person-specific and discipline-specific characteristics.
FINDINGS

## Transit Agencies Interviewed

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>FTA Region</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Access Service Pittsburgh (ACCESS)</td>
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<td>Bay Area (SF), CA</td>
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<td>Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART)</td>
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### Eligibility Determination Strategies by Transit Agency

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<tr>
<th>Eligibility Determination Strategy Type</th>
<th>Transit Agency</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<td>In-person interviews and functional assessments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Measurable and specific conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Efforts to improve passenger awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Detailed on-street assessments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trip-by-trip eligibility and software</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5 5 3 2 6 4 5 6 3 6 2 1 5 4 5 6</strong></td>
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### Findings: In-Person Interviews | Functional Assessments

- 15/16 agencies implemented – in-person interviews and functional assessments

- Functional Assessments (12/15)
  - Hired personnel to conduct assessments or collaborate with local universities
  - Contributes to improved accuracy
  - Only 3 agencies used consistently

- In-person interviews (13/15)
  - Majority conducted them with all applicants

- Challenges include: ensuring the accuracy and consistency of determinations, addressing the high volume of applicants, and confronting customer appeals. Those who did not currently utilize one or both methods of assessment cited cost, increasing passenger applications, and a lack of resources (e.g., facility, staffing) as barriers to adopting this practice.
Findings: Measurable and Specific Conditions

- 11/16 agencies currently use measurable and specific conditions (i.e., environmental barriers, functional ability)

- Conditional eligibility
  - 11 agencies pointed to weather-related conditions
  - 5 are not able to apply identified conditions to scheduling decisions on a trip-by-trip basis
    - “We can’t enforce conditions unless looking and enforcing by trip. We currently do not have the ability to enforce trip-by-trip scheduling.”
    - 4/5 agencies pointed to software limitations as the largest barrier

- Challenges are primarily political and operational
  - “We’d love to do conditional eligibility, but just can’t, given our environment. We’re a very customer-driven county. Customers are very vocal and the county rescinded changes within 9 days in response to customer complaints.”

Findings: Detailed On-Street Assessments

- 12/15 integrated detailed on-street assessments in various phases of their determination process.

- Agencies used various modes to assess and track built environment.
  - Carrying out real-world assessments with in-house checklists or environmental audits
  - Identifying and tracking path-of-travel barriers using Google Earth and GiS
  - Addressing customer-reported barriers through travel training assessments

- Only a small number (n=4) described successfully sharing information collected about environmental barriers with municipal offices to facilitate public infrastructure improvements.
Findings: Efforts to Improve Passenger Awareness

- 12/16 agencies reported using outreach efforts (i.e., letter and phone call)
  - Passenger awareness regarding conditions of eligibility
  - Additional available accessible transportation options

- Paratransit provider in FTA Region 10 explained that they incorporated customer education directly into the agency’s eligibility determination process:
  - “We do this as part of our interviews…discuss travel training and other transportation options to help the applicant coordinate multiple services. We see it as an integral part of [the] assessment process, and want to get people to use fixed route so we give options at the time of the interview. The applicant can have individual challenges but our transportation coordinator is able to help with this. It is easier to do in-person.”

- Other agencies objected to utilizing these practices and/or expressed challenges:
  - Did not support sharing information on alternative transportation options with paratransit eligible individuals, equated doing so as “pushing them off onto fixed route.”
  - Utilized customer outreach to educate passengers about other transportation options, but stopped due to resource and funding constraints

Findings: Travel Training

- More than half (11/16) offer travel training

- Reframing the portrayal of fixed route as part of an agency approach to promote travel training:
  - “We stress [the] opportunities fixed route service provides to ride independently, [no need to] make reservations, and give yourself a pay raise for free. We put marketing posters in the train stations and bus stops and put ads in the paper.”

- Additional innovative approaches to fixed route travel training include
  - Stressing the incentives of fixed route transportation
  - Offering unlimited and one-on-one travel training to customers on an ongoing basis
  - Tracking customer success after training completion

- 5 transit agencies interviewed do not currently offer formal in-house travel training programs
Discussion

- Focus on identifying and enhancing a customer’s ability to use fixed-route, rather than their limitations.

- Adopting an eligibility determination strategy in isolation may pose implementation challenges (e.g., interdependence of conditional eligibility and trip-by-trip scheduling).

- Agencies successfully utilizing conditional eligibility describe an implementation process that is inexpensive and incremental
  - Modifying existing software to meet needs
  - Creating a community database of path-of-travel barriers based on individual assessments

- Address customer benefits of fixed-route transit in public outreach campaigns, travel training programs, and develop collaborations with other departments and community organizations.
Acknowledgement

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