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MWRTA

The date that the MWRTA took position of paratransit services was July 1, 2009.

1. Hours of Service:

When the RTA took over paratransit, Ed Carr gave his **word** that the hours of service would not change from those hours offered by the MBTA. Those hours were 6am to 1am.

In comes the pandemic. Hours were obviously slashed because people weren't going anywhere. During this time, communication from the RTA was literally non-existent regarding "new hours".

As things opened up, hours were "expanded" but have never reached the level of service that was promised. The current hours are "hidden" on the Ride Guide on the RTA website. They are: for Tier 1, current hours are Monday – Friday, 5:30am to 11:00pm; Saturday & Sunday, 8:00am to 6:00pm. Weekend hours will also apply to: Martin Luther King Day, President's Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day & Veteran's Day. For Tier 2, current hours are Monday – Friday, 5:30am to 9:00pm; Saturday, 8:00am to 6:00pm. There is no service on Sundays or the following major holidays: New Year's Day, Patriot's Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

While the transition from the MBTA to the MWRTA was done in conjunction with three members of the Framingham Disability Commission, changes in the hours was done without input from the disability community.

When asked why hours haven't been expanded, the response from the call center has been that "people don't ask". Of course they don't ask. They were told NO for so long that they don't bother anymore.

2. Staffing

The MWRTA has consistently offered disabled passengers door-to-door service (escort passenger from door to van) as well as passenger assistance (help with packages/bags, seatbelts). This has changed drastically. Most of the new drivers (and some of the old) do not come to the passenger's door. Rather, they will exit their vehicle and stand next to it. There is very seldom an offer to assist with packages when the passenger leaves their home and seatbelts are frequently ignored. In many cases, the driver doesn't even know if the seat belt is being used. There doesn't seem to be anything being done to rectify this.

3. Fares

Since the pandemic, the MWRTA has not been charging fares. While this has been a benefit for the wallets of passengers, it has created a glut of frivolous trips that have bogged down the system. Apparently, the reason is that the RTA has not been able to get the parts needed for a new fare system for the fixed route. If the fixed route doesn't charge a fare, the other systems (demand response & catch connect) cannot charge. Why hasn't the Transit Authority been using the old system until they can get the parts for the new system? This would cut down on people taking extra trips and over burdening the system.

4. Timeliness

Each night I receive a call from the automated attendant with my trip times for the next day. While the arrival time has improved since the pandemic, there is still an issue. I had one trip to be picked up from work with a scheduled time of 6:13pm. The van did not arrive until after 7:00pm. Three weeks ago, the driver was 20 minutes late picking me up and I was his first trip of the day. Just this week, my scheduled pickup time was 7:15 and the driver was 10 minutes late. He said that he was told he couldn't leave the yard until 7:00. It takes more than 15 minutes to get from Blandin Street to my house. Not a good way to start the morning.

5. Catch Connect Accessibility

The vehicles provided are far less accessible than they should be. While a person can use the wheelchair lift, the height of the lift is fine for someone in a wheelchair. For a person using the lift and walking onto the vehicle, the opening is too short, which seems to lead the passenger to hitting their head as they enter the vehicle.

The side steps on the vehicle are completely accessibility challenged. The first two steps seem to be at least 12 inches in height with the third step being about an inch and a half. The entrance does not provide enough places to grab on to in order to pull themselves up into the vehicle. It's primarily a single pole, which can be slippery if the passenger is wearing gloves or has wet hands. There used to be a "C" shaped handle but those were removed.

The first bench seat behind the driver is accessible but the second seat is 5 to 6 inches higher, making it difficult to get on as well as difficult to ride on as your feet don't reach the floor. If a driver has to quickly brake, the passenger can slide forward in the seat and tumble forward, causing a great deal of pain. The vehicles also have no arm rest, which also makes it challenging to feel safe. To keep from sliding sideways, you have to hold onto the seatbelt on the other side of the seat for dear life.

In one case, I got onto the vehicle but was not able to slide the door closed completely. I asked the driver for help and was told that wasn't his job. I asked for a reasonable accommodation due to my disability (with MS I have reduced strength in my arms) but was told that he didn't have to provide reasonable accommodations.

The lever to open the door is the same color as the rest of the door panel. For a person with a visual impairment, the lever is basically "hidden" on the door panel.

If a person was to use the lift, they are supposed to sit in a “transition chair”. These chairs are far too narrow unless you weigh 150 lbs. and have no rear end.

The lift has proven to be a challenge for people with larger wheelchairs. They will go up on the lift but can not access the vehicle because the lower part of the wheelchair gets stuck.

Recently I was picked up by one of these vans that was being used for THE RIDE and not Catch Connect. The MWRTA should not be using accessibility challenged vehicles for people with disabilities.

6. Safety

The Ride vehicles are equipped with a plexiglass door that separates the driver from the passengers. The door is frequently in the way for both passengers and drivers.

There is a large safety issue for the drivers, especially driving at night. Light from other vehicles shine off the door so that the driver has difficulty figuring out where the other vehicle is. I’ve been on trips where we came close to having an accident because of the confusion the doors provide.

While the doors probably add a level of safety for fixed route drives from Covid, they make no sense for demand response drivers. Part of their responsibility is escorting from door to van (or van to door), assisting with packages, strapping in wheelchairs, assisting with seatbelts; all pretty much face-to-face contact. These doors separate the driver from the passenger by at least 4 feet; much further than the driver is from the passenger when they are assisting with a seatbelt or hooking up a wheelchair.

Continued use of these doors is a safety risk.

There is a saying amount the disability community ... Don’t make a decision about us, without us. Here’s to hoping for a beneficial partnership

between the Metrowest Regional Transit Authority and the Framingham Disability Commission to make transportation safe, accessible and enjoyable for the Framingham disability community.